Other Songs

Jacek Dukaj

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I

A.
Nocturne

THE fog swirled around the horse-drawn cab, with soft white and grey shapes suspended within. Mr. Berbelek tried to read his destiny. Water, smoke, leaves in the wind, loose sand and human crowds - in them fates are best seen.

His head gravitated back towards the leather-upholstery. Drawing the moist air deep into his lungs, he defended himself from the night's morph, a little man in an expensive coat with a too smooth face and too large eyes. He picked up a newspaper left by the previous passenger. In the dirty light of passing pyroki Lanterns, he could hardly read the Herdonian fonts: rune-like letters, like fragments of some larger characters, fat and thick on the right, fading towards the left. The hard paper crumpled and broke in his gloved hands. MOON WITCH IN LOVE. WHO IS THE BETROTHED? Next Column - An engraving of a sea monster and the headline: FIRST NIMROD OF THE AFRICAN COMPANY LOST AT SEA Political commentary by Ryter Dreug-z-Kohle: Was it really so difficult to predict the alliance of John Blackbeard with Kratistos Seven-Fingers? Rome, Gothland, Franconia and Neurgia will now have to bow to the Warlock's Dream. Let's thank our diplomats for their great work! The text was dripping with sarcasm. The half-moon was reflected in the puddles on the black pavement, the cloudless sky revealed pink seas, the Kratista Illeia must have been in a good mood (perhaps she really was in love?) or she had consciously spread her crown. Mr. Berbelek's anthos rarely extended beyond an arm's length, and indeed it was only in the fog and smoke that one could guess anything about its shape - perhaps the future, a harbinger

of kismet, as popular superstition would have it. But hadn't Mr. Berbelek bent the will of both Minister Bruge and Shulima? So he looked thoughtfully into the swirling mist.

Clop, Clopp, Clllaappp, the cab driver did not rush his horse, the night was quiet and warm, the moment dictated tranquility and reason. Mr. Berbelek remembered the heat of Shulima's wine-heavy breath and the scent of her Aegyptian perfume. This spring, the reign of ascetic fashion from Herdon had ended (a small victory over the Kratistos Anaxegiros, at least in this field) and traditional European chimaty, London kaftans, buttonless shirts revealing the torso for men— kaftan dresses, sophorias and mitani, Arabic shalwars, bust-lifting corsets, and flashy nipple jewelry for women, had taken its place. Shulima's forearms were wrapped in long, spiraling bronze bracelets in the shape of snakes, and when Esthle Amitace offered Berbelek her hand to kiss, he looked straight into her reptilian emerald eyes as the touch of her skin almost burned him. "Esthle." "Esthlos." She was already smiling, a good sign, it established a form of kindness and confidentiality from the first glance. Then she whispered to him from behind a blue fan, making ironic comments about the guests passing them. Also his uncle, Esthlos A. R. Bruge, Minister of Commerce of the Duchy of Neurgia, who had recently become entangled in a complicated affair with a Gothic cavalrywoman, the centurion of The Horror, who was apparently a powerful demiurgos and after each meeting with her, Bruge came back a little more handsome and a little more stupid, as Shulima laughed. So maybe the minister really has already been tricked? He agreed to Berbelek's proposal practically without resistance, with a wave of his hand and a grimace. He didn't even want to think about it. That's how the Njute Merchant House, Ikita te Berbelek, obtained a virtual monopoly on the import of furs from Northern Herdon. Mr. Berbelek celebrated. Between one toast and another, and without hesitation, he invited Shulima to his summer estate in Iberia. The snake-like woman raised an eyebrow, snapped her fan, and flashed her green eyes. Gladly. But now, as he counted the hot moons in the puddles and the beats of hooves on the city pavement in the humid silence, Mr. Berbelek thought, What if it was exactly the other way around, if it was her anthos that devoured me insidiously and it was her spite that pushed this invitation out of my mouth? By telling the story of the Gothic centurion-demiurge, wasn't she trying to make me understand something...?

The fog had thinned and he could see the angular silhouettes of buildings leaning over the uncovered cab hut. Classic Vodenburg architecture never had

much charm for Berbelek, all those massive tenement houses squeezed into winding rows, streets like canyons of a stone labyrinth, roofs studded with grotesques and gargoyles, windows like shooting galleries, portals like crypt doors, dark courtyards behind gates hidden in the shadows, eternally wet cobblestones, along which streams of city dirt flow down towards the port and the sea... The center and most of the capital's residential districts were built during the time of Kratistos Gregory the Grim, when he resided in the prince's palace. Vodenburg's Keros then bent and melted like wax in the fire of the crown of the Kratistos, and the palace itself congealed after Gregory's departure in the form of ghostly gardens of stone and steel. Berbelek was invited there just after moving to Vodenburg, in contrast to his own home, it had seemed to be sunny and cheerful. However, people change faster than inanimate matter. Three generations after Gregory the Grim, the Vodenburgers learned to laugh and have fun, and he even heard a few jokes from them within the past six years. Fortunately, Shulima is not from here. "The Twilight Rider Opens" was on the penultimate page. Today's cartoon - he strained his eyes - showed Chancellor Lóke on all fours licking the Warlock's chamber pot with a delighted expression. Well, Rome wasn't built in a day, and neither is a sense of humor.

They passed through the temple square. On the steps of the House of Ishtar he saw several novitiate whores, their white thighs glistening in the gas light. The cab turned, accelerating down the steeply descending street, chloppp-chloppp. He reached into the inside pocket of his jacket and took out a cigarette and matches. Yeah. Inhaling the smoke, he leaned his head back against the leather backrest and stared at the sky. Despite the afternoon rain, it was cloudless, the stars twinkled playfully, and the moon was almost blinding. Above the port, where the air pigs hung on iron chains, their bulbous silhouettes obscured the star canopies in the front. The tobacco glowed red, Mr. Berbelek blew, and bright sparks flew into the night. Let's say Kristoff maintains sales at last year's level. But after taking over the government's orders... One hundred and twenty, one hundred and forty thousand groszy of pure profit. Fifteen percent of that... Let's say twenty thousand. I would finally be able to pay off my father and close the pensions of Orlanda, Maria and the children. You would also need to hire the services of some good teknites soma. Admit it, Hieronim Berbelek-z-Ostrog: you are getting old like everyone else.

The monotonous movement of the cab and the rhythmic clatter of its hooves had a soporific, almost hypnotic effect - when it stopped, Hieronim jumped up as if woken up from a morning sleep.

"We're here, Esthlos," the driver muttered.

Mr. Berbelek got out and groped his pocket idly for some change.

The gate to the courtyard was closed, of course, but a pyrokian light burned above the smaller door next to it. He tapped it three times with the silver head of his cane. The cab clattered slowly up the empty street towards the temple square. One more puff of black tobacco in the cool twilight of predawn at this longest hour, when the gods straighten their bones and the keros of the universe is a little softer, a little closer to Matter...

"Ah, at last! I thought you wouldn't come back tonight! How was the ball, huh? Come on, give me that coat and gloves! It wasn't raining again, was it?"

Mr. Berbelek ignored the grumpy words of the old servant and, without even taking off his doublet, went to the front library. Here, at the empty desk, he wrote a short note on the success of negotiations with the Ministry of Trade on a small piece of calf parchment. Having broken the card twice in the Jewish fashion, he spread a green trail over the candle and sealed the letter with it. Another signet ring with the Ostrog coat of arms and:

"Porte! Have Anton take it to Esthlos Njute's office. Now!"

However, he did not turn away from the desk. This smoke above the candle - he raised his hand - there is no draft - is it a saber, a sword? — in the leaves in the wind, in the crowd of people, in the fog and water and smoke, in that dark smoke - until he leaned forward, blinking - a curved blade, yes.

B.
The Merchant House

Mr. Berbelek didn't get enough sleep that day. Mr. Berbelek didn't sleep well on nights in Vodenburg, but now he slept only a short time: it was barely nine o'clock when Esthlos Kristoff Njute entered the bedroom, pushing Porte and Tereza out of the doorway, and immediately all the drowsiness began to evaporate from Berbelek's body, the nightmares from his mind.

"Ach, ach, ach! Hieronim, miracle-worker, my salon kratistos, I fall at your feet, at your feet!"

"I hope you get leprosy... Don't open the windows!"

"I won't get into how you did it, but I will tell you this much: you did it and it was worthy of every last penny, we will declare the next ship at Sytyna in your name, show your face, let me hug you!"

"He did! You could arrange it yourself, Bruge would agree to everything. Apparently it was love that made him so stupid, anyway, his head is in the clouds...Tereza! Qahwa!"

Noble Kristoff Njute, Jerusalemite and fur tycoon, he also was not from Vodenburg (he was a second-generation Herdonian, born to Neue Reese Herman, son of Gustav), which explained his effusiveness to some extent. Nevertheless, he had lived here longer than Berbelek, and it was one of the biggest puzzles for the latter how Kristoff managed to remain such a ribald choleric, while

even a true demiurgos of optimism and désinvolture fell into the "Vodenburg depression" after a few months of living under Gregory's morph. But Njute was the antithesis of the average in general: six and a half pous tall, two lithos liveweight, architectural shoulders, hair like a scream of flame: a red beard, and red mane, and that cavernous voice: the roar of an drunken bear, the whisper of clinking glasses.

"I immediately placed new orders and sent the courier to offer a higher purchase price, we will displace Kreuck not only from Neurgia, but also from the Baltic principalities, I can already see it" continued Mr. Njute. "A year or two at most, they can't stay on those Gypsy loans forever, and when we go north..."

"Mushakhin has the support of the royal treasury" Hieronim interjected, slurping hot cinnamon qahwa.

"Ha! Isn't that why I brought you into the partnership? You have friends in eastern courts, your first one came from Moscow, right?"

"Kristoff..."

"Well, I'm very sorry that I mentioned it, Mr. Martyr! Kriste, how you can enjoy mourning! Remember when I had to drag you out of Lóke's kennels? I thought..."

"Leave."

"Well, now, now. What was I talking about... Kreucek, Mushakhin, the Rozarski brothers. Then it's just the Siberian Khanate. You can't beat them, the transport costs"

Kristoff hit the pillows with his fist.

"Well I'm not going to! Vice versa! Sable to North Herdon for example. Just hop across the strait! How will Grandfather Frost morph this ice bridge from Asia to New Lapland...!"

"Of course, I've been morphing him since the seventies. Too weak anthos, he would have to move from Ubba to the Strait of Ibn Kada."

"Why are you making me feel so depressed, Esthlos? Three kinds of good

news this morning and it's as if he was just dug out of his grave!"

"Just so you know — It is how a person wakes up more tired than when he went to bed—"

"What did you dream again?"

"I don't remember, I'm not sure, and I don't know how to tell it. Imagine this, Kristoff, something like this: You're locked up but in infinite space, I run to where I'm standing and they cut me to the bone every time I turn around, but I'm not the one turning around"

"Enough, enough! I have to get you going, you're getting rusty here. I actually made you go to that ball — and what? did I do wrong?"

"What news?"

"Oh, don't you know! Thor goes to war! They will fight for Uuk again. Imagine these orders, the winter quota itself, and then the price jump...!"

"Parasite."

"Heh. In three hours the *Philip the Apostle* arrives, a bird came at dawn. Before the deadline and with no losses. Now tell me we shouldn't invest in our own fleet!"

"No losses, because you caught that Persian hecatomb on your last voyage. Have you read yesterday's Rider? Something had eaten the Company's clipper ship, along with their best nimrod, and where was it? - In the Mediterranean! You're talking about okeanos!"

"That's why you'll get up from this bed and come with me to the port. We need to catch Ihmet on the gangplank before he signs a contract with others. You'll convince him, I have a feeling you'll like each other. In his letters he spoke highly of you - have you really never met? Anyway, now you have a chance, exchange your bloody stories, take him to the bathhouse, everything at the company's expense, be extravagant, let him have his mind buzzing, whatever __"

"I don't feel like it," Hieronim muttered.

Kristoff slammed him in the back, causing the goblet with the remains of

the qahwa to fall from Mr. Berbelek's hand onto his bedclothes and onto the carpet.

"I believe in you!"

"Fanatic."

Mr. Berbelek shuffled to the sanitarium, where Tereza had already prepared boiling water for a bath. The steam sprinkled the colorful rosette overlooking the building's courtyard. Only at this time of day did the sunlight drive away the wet shadow from the courtyard, and in an hour there would be a stone twilight there - then the gas flames of the pyroki, reflecting shimmering off the green and blue mosaic, would give the bathroom the appearance of a sea aquarium. Here, Hieronim often fell asleep in the bath, and from here the dreams he borne lulled him most gently.

Mr. Berbelek generally fell asleep too easily and too often - except at night, when he found it difficult to do so. From childhood, as long as he could remember, long before Kolenica, he was haunted by black nightmares, from which he was unable to tell or even remember well after waking up; he only remembered the feeling of complete loss and disorientation, a fear so deep that it was impossible to express.

However, his days in Vodenburg passed in a constant sleepy laziness, most of the time he didn't even get up from his bed, he didn't get dressed, there was no reason or purpose. The servants shook their heads and grumbled in hushed tones, but he paid no attention. Voices, people, light and darkness, noise and silence, meals with different flavors, the sequence of the seasons outside the windows - it all merged into one warm, sticky mess that drowned him in slow tides, sealing his senses tightly. All it took was the strong hand of Esthlos Njute to pull Hieronim to the surface. Njute always knew why and for what.

Money, money, money. It seemed that since arriving in the capital of Neurgia, Mr. Berbelek had not thought about anything else, or at least there was no other axis for his actions. Because if he escaped from this net, it was not towards different desires, but into dark immobility and willessness, into this Tartarus of the elderly and the suicidal, into which the widest gate opened from Vodenburg. However, it must be admitted that wealth is at least a purpose, a reason to live, perhaps lowly, but true, and from it new things are born and humanity is regenerated. For example, pride and personal dignity — from the

aesthetics of clothing and the forms of etiquette. To the whiteness of the shirt and the weight of the rings on the fingers determine the value of the moment. This is how inanimate objects can morph a person's well-being - are we not the basest substance?

So when he joined Kristoff, already dressed in his dress clothes, with his hair greased with oil, a green leia tied under his chin, a black British doublet tightly buttoned, and wearing jugras with the tops polished by a house slave — he was a slightly different Esthlos Berbelek than the one Kristoff had found in the warm stuffiness of the bedroom; thinking slightly differently and behaving completely differently. Hieronim jumped into Esthlos Njute's carriage as energetically as Njute himself. The spring sun was shining brightly, and he threw his humyia coat on the backrest. Kristoff, on the other hand, remained in his large robe with a beaver-fur collar — and now the Herdonian was leaning back in the wide carriage, Mr. Berbelek at his side seemed even more slim and inconspicuous.

He looked at the thermometer before leaving: seventeen marks on the Alexandrian scale - although there was a strong, cold wind blowing from the sea and jagged sand-colored clouds moved quickly across the azure sky. The smoke from Woerner's steelworks usually covered the northern horizon, but today the wind took care of it too, the sky was like frosting. They were traveling in a different direction, down towards the port, and Hieronim never lost sight of the air pigs, whose long bodies were thrown sideways and upwards. He counted them: seven. One in the colors of the Sultanate of Malta arrived, the baskets were just moving. He turned his gaze to the port's flag tower. Indeed, the announcement of the arrival of The *Philip the Apostle* had already been posted. He had not yet seen the port itself, the streets of Vodenburg were extremely winding: they had been designed to defend against the British pirates who had been raiding this part of Europe until 850 P.U.R. The northern cities, which submitted and paid tribute to the British, avoided destruction, but the traces of which were still visible in Vodenburg, In the form of a chipped coastal wall for example. Its dark gray mass towered over the city's port district, now home to the guard of sea teknitoi and pig moorings. Oval snouts of hundred-year-old pyresiders protruded from the black eye sockets of the towers.

Before reaching the port boulevards, the carriage had to go through the even more narrowing streets of the old merchant quarter — and here it got stuck for long minutes. They were surrounded by a crowd of people, a suspension of shouts, laughter and loud conversations among four languages pushed into ears,

into nostrils - smells, from the most common to the most exotic, those from Persian and Indian shops, open "fools' stalls", all pungent. As usual, in such crowds and confusion, each thing seemed to be a little less itself and a little more something else, that is, nothing, a thing, a word, a memory, a thought. Mr. Berbelek absent-mindedly tapped the head of his stick against his chin.

"Is this Ihmet..."

"Yes?"

"Does he have any family? Where does he live?"

"Tie him up on the ground? Hmmm. This city has many advantages, but few people would call it charming."

"I was thinking about a house near Cartagena, the property next to my villa is up for sale next month, I got a letter, you could..."

"They value such bonds very much. Hmmm."

It should not be forgotten that Ryter Njute is a xenophobe at heart. Mr. Berbelek remembered this well, he himself was once a stranger to Kristoff; what's more, here in Neurgia they were both strangers. Kristoff's xenophobia was so specific that it did not result in hatred, reluctance or even fear. Kris simply approached everyone who was not a Herdonian or a Kristian as if he were a wild barbarian, expecting the worst and not being surprised at anything, and greeting any sign of humanity as if it were a great victory for his morph. Behind this there were high levels of unintentional contempt, although outwardly it manifested itself only as effusive cordiality.

"You speak Greek! How glad that makes me!"

"Would you join us for dinner?"

"Unless, of course, you eat meat and drink alcohol."

It was impossible not to like Kristoff. Mr. Berbelek took out an amber tobacco pipe and offered it to the Ryter. The driver offered a flame, and they both lit.

"You know Esthle Shulima Amitace."

“Of course,” Mr. Njute slowly exhaled the sticky smoke from his lungs. ”What mixture is this?”

”Ours.”

”Really? Well, look. What about this Amitace?”

Mr. Berbelek chuckled as he took a deep drag.

“I think I fell under her crown.” Or she under mine. So I wonder...”

”That all women are demiurgoi of desire?”

”Yeah.”

”Then what are you concerned about? You’re doing the right thing, intertwine with them, with Bruge, with his relatives, that’s the point, that’s the point. Towards greater NIB power!”

”She came from Byzantine. Do you know anyone who knew her there?

”I’ll ask. Or what? Do you believe these rumors?”

”What rumors?”

”That she’s young not because she’s young, and beautiful not because she’s beautiful...”

”Oh, as usual, they tell sick stories because they are jealous.”

”Fact. After all, she is Bruge’s relative”

”The Minister of Clay.”

The driver cracked his whip, the horses jerked, and the carriage broke free from the crowd.

They left the shadow of the street onto the sunny boulevards, the wide terraces of the port, where the keros immediately hardened, freed from the pressure of the crowd, and Mr. Berbelek chained his thoughts into a disciplined line, the interrupted conversation ended.

The depots of the Njute, Ikita and Berbelek Merchants’ House were located

in a long, wooden bakhauz, opening with high doors directly onto the stone quay. Vodenburg had a deep harbor and a closed, safe bay (the work of some forgotten kratistos) and ships usually moored here side by side, completely covering the sea horizon; no different today. Loading and unloading were in progress, and there were about a hundred slaves and hired workers at the NIB wharf itself.

Kristoff and Hieronim pulled up to the warehouse from the back. Esthlos Njute got out and took his watch from his pocket.

"Half an hour tops."

They used the external stairs to enter the currency exchange office, which was located in the superstructure on the third floor. They passed N'Yuma at the door.

"The rush of people from the *Karol*, to the oars, to the oars, We must make room immediately for the *Philip*."

The one-eyed black man nodded.

Last year, N'Yuma bought himself out of the Ryter's bond, but he still has the slave mentality, and this morph is reflected the most deeply.

Mr. Berbelek had his office here, a corner room was designated for him, but he only visited it twice over the years. He saw no need to maintain the fiction, he was as much of a merchant as Kristoff was of a diplomat. If he went to the warehouses at all, he ended up visiting Njute's office, which had the best view; a wide, three-panel window looked directly onto the harbor and the bay, and he could observe all the ant-like bustle from the height of the bridge. If it wasn't raining or the frost wasn't too heavy, Njute left the window open and the sea wind freely entered the interior. The salty air rinsed every equipment here many times and saturated the walls and carpet with its scent.

While lighting his tobacco, Mr. Berbelek watched the birdlike movements of a cargo crane loading iron-bound crates onto another company's okeanos clipper, watched the *Karol*'s heel as it slowly left the quay, watched the rhythmic work of the oarsmen on the towboats, and N'Yuma's naked biceps, covered in some tribal marks. The morphunk, dark-skinned, standing on a heap of old rigging, shouting curses and encouragements to the porters cleaning up the wharf, for them he is a lord and ruler, crushing them into the ground with just the look of his wild eye...

Seagulls squawked melancholy. A slave girl brought hot thea; he thanked her without turning away from the window. Behind his back, Kristoff was arguing with a Persian clerk about some overdue tax, and they were switching insults and invocations from Oki to Greek to Pahlavi and back again. Hieronim threw a peta out the window. Leaning his forearms against the high doorframe, he slurped thea, the salt stinging his tongue.

Esthlos Berbelek thought back to the beginning of his merchant career. Lutecja Parisiorum, the summer after the Warlock's Carpathian offensive, had received Hieronim Berbelek in her salons. By then he had become so stunted that he even thought in the third person. "Hieronim kneels." "Hieronim entertains the company." "Now Hieronim is impressive." "Now Hieronim will rest." "Now Hieronim will cut his own throat." The Warlock's Anthos lingered within him like a hot stench. He forgot to eat. Sharp objects, precipices, rushing horses under which he could throw himself - drew him like fire to a moth. Of course he slept non-stop. If he did wake up, it was at strange hours, with strange desires. It was good: that he had any desires at all. This is how Esthlos Kristoff Njute caught him in his clutches. With a large cross on his chest, a wild beard, no knowledge or tact in a salon: a fur importer from Herdon with huge plans and a sales market under an informal Persian monopoly. "If only you could reach them, after all, you know them all, and whoever you don't know, at least knows you. Just think, Esthlos, how we could get rich!"Gold! Wealth! That evening, over a glass of sweet wine, in the colorful lights of Dzunguon fires in the moonless sky, in the cloud of morphs of the Frankish aristocracy, in the heart of the anthos of Leo Vialle, The Kratistos of Awe and Pride - he decided to covet wealth. He decided to want, to want, he decided to decide - by Jupiter, no by your will somehow! Oh, the exclamation mark is a start. Then change the narrative mode. "Mr. Berbelek decides to stay a rich man." "Mr. Berbelek will be a rich man." Has the Warlock's stench diminished? Just in case, Hieronim stayed close to the Ryter from then on, certain that the impulsive Herdonian would force him to attend any party he was invited to — or let him sleep too late. Over time, other desires began to emerge. Esthle Amitace was the latest idea — wasn't she desirable? Everything was heading in the right direction: at this moment Mr. Berbelek was no longer sure whether he just wanted to lust after her or whether he actually wanted her. The hardest thing to morph is yourself and the easiest thing to miss is the moment of changing your own keros.

"Dammit, Kristoff."

The *Philip the Apostle* lowered her sails on the second buoy and moved towards the quay, losing speed, the crew was waiting with hooks and ropes.

Njute went to the window, leaned out and shouted: "N'Yuma! Captain, pilot and nimrod to me!"

He yanked Hieronim by the arm towards the door to the living room.

"I ordered dinner at Skella's."

Apart from Berbelek's office, the living room was probably the least used room in the NIB headquarters.

The area of the bakhaus, six thousand square pous, allowed The Ryter to indulge his various whims: in the superstructure he also accommodated, among others, two bedrooms (officially "for company guests") and a chess room. The parlor was a long, narrow roomi= with windows overlooking the harbor wall and the air pig moorings. It was decorated in a Celtic style, with dark wood covering the walls, and massive furniture of oak, hyex, and prosin, with straight angles and sharp edges, clustered in the corners of the room - except for the high table in the center of the room, around which three doulos with "House of Skella" were written. It was set for five people.

Mr. Berbelek sat down at the table, adjusted the cutlery, poured himself some wine and got up to greet the guests. Two of them were strong teknites of the sea and were unlikely to be able to control their auras, which Berbelek immediately noticed by the way the wine was preserved in his goblet and how his cheeks grew warm as the blood rushed to his head and his face flushed red. Kristoff and Skella's slaves were also blushing — but not the guests themselves, of course.

Quick handshakes, genuine smiles — the doulos hurried with water to wash their hands, and without waiting, Njute toasted to a successful journey from Herdon. He sat at the top, Mr. Berbelek on his left, on the right - Otto Priinz, captain of the "Filip", behind him — Heinemerle Trept, a young okeanos pilot; for Ihmet Zajdar, the first nimrod of Njute, Ikita and Berbelek, was, of course, placed next to Hieronim. They exchanged pleasantries over steaming bowls of soups. Both teknitoi sat on the same side of the table, and the liquids crept dangerously close to the edges of the dishes.

Ihmet was the only one in Mr. Berbelek's company that he didn't know at all. Otto, a Kristian and Njute's compatriot, had been sailing for NIB from the beginning, first on his own clipper, now as captain of the Apostle, the company's first okeanikos. They hired Heinemerle right after she was accepted into the Imperial Navigators' Guild. Because she was a woman, she was in a weaker position compared to the rest of the crew and posed a greater risk of conflict over a long voyage, thus her contract was cheaper - but Trept's skills spoke for themselves, and she clearly worked well with old Prunz.

However, the swarthy-faced Zajdar... his connections with the company remained the weakest. In recent years, as the sea monsters have become more aggressive, the prices for the services of nimrods experienced in ship protection had increased significantly, and there aren't very many of them anymore. Esthlos Njute had tried everything possible: a one-way cruise contract, joint contracts, joining convoys... That's how he acquired Zajdar. The Persian had ended his long-term cooperation with Castiga and recently had begun accepting only single orders, which did not suit everyone; but Kristoff used him whenever he could, and hired him to protect Njute, Ikita and Berbelek'a first wholly owned okeanikos. He even started calling Zajdar "The First Nimrod of the Company", hoping to conjure reality with words. Ihmet had invariably responded with polite, noncommittal letters.

"I read about the death of the First African's nimrod yesterday." Mr. Berbelek then asked in Pahlavi. "I assume your trip was without any unpleasant incidents?"

"Unless you count the sirens on the Lokoloids. There was no murder either."

"Ah, we never doubted you. Especially Esthlos Njute — he thinks very highly of you."

Ihmet Zajdar bowed his head at these words. Inexperienced teknitoi, lacking self-control; or those who were too experienced, who had been practicing their art for too long, those whose work required many weeks of continuous expansion of anthos, like teknitoi of the sea, who drove ships for months in the tight embrace of their auras, or teknitoi of war, strategos, ares — they were often unable to control these auras, no longer able to fold them, to eliminate them, and they left a heavy seal on the keros regardless of the circumstances, day and night, awake and asleep, in solitude and in the heart of the crowd. A side effect of the long-term presence of such a nimrod on the ship was fatalities among the

crew. Arguments, fights, friendly rivalries that otherwise would have ended with a broken tooth - in a nimrod's crown - resulted in smashed heads, slit throats and drownings overboard. Zajdar, however, enjoyed a very good reputation.

"I noticed," he says, having sprinkled his soup thickly with spices. "I'm afraid I'll have to disappoint him."

"But you don't even know the proposal yet."

"But I will receive such an offer, yes?" Ihmet looked questioningly at the blushing Hieronim.

Mr. Berbelek looked back. The Persian's eyes were blue, the clear, bright blue of a spring sky, set in deep wrinkles of deeply tanned skin — wrinkles from the sun and wind, for Zajdar looked no more than thirty-something. In reality, he was well into his sixties or seventies, but the morph had a firm grip on Matter. The body is merely a garment for the mind, as the philosophers wrote. His clothes were also misleading, as Ihmet wore Herdonian clothes, simple cut, white, black and gray, narrow legs and sleeves, shirt laced up to the neck. Only his black beard was trimmed in the Ishmaelite style.

"Have you already signed a contract with someone else?"

The Persian shook his head, swallowing the hot soup.

Hieronim just sighed, leaning over his plate.

They were silent for a long time, listening to the loud conversation between Esthlos Njute, Captain Priinz, and Trept. Heinemerle talked excitedly about the wonders of the South Herdon ports and the savages of the equatorial islands, animal drugs and exotic morphezoons. During the break between courses, the *Philip*'s" verified manifesto was brought to the Ryter, and Kristoff began to calculate the expected profits again.

"In the north also, in these vast forests" said Heinemerle, meanwhile, "They stretch from Okeanos to Okeanos, or at least to the Megoros, to the sixth leaf. Anaxegiros has not yet grown strong enough there to displace the wild kratistoi. In the far north, for example, in Herdon-Aragon, when we were waiting for the goods, I talked to the settlers, myths or truth, it's hard to say, maybe they are already melting in the crown of Anaxegiros, about these cities of living stone, rivers of light, crystal fish, thousand-year-old snakes wiser than people, and

flowers of love and hate, trees that give birth to daemons of the forest. Tell us, Ihmet, you have seen it with your own eyes."

"I can't say."

"On the ship, when you were in a melancholy mood, you could spin long tales..."

"Because they were other people's stories," Zajdar smiled under his mustache.

"I don't understand," Trept said, irritated. "Meaning what? That they were lies? Can you lie?"

"That's not the point." Mr. Berbelek said quietly, breaking his bread. "Repeating someone else's stories can be untrue, but this frees us. However, speaking about your own experiences..."

"What?" she interrupted him. "What exactly are you trying to say? That you can only be honest in a lie? Such zenons are good for children."

Mr. Berbelek shrugged.

"I like sharing stories," Heinemerle muttered. "What's the point of exploring the world if you don't tell anyone what you've seen?"

Before dessert, Njute signed bank letters with personal bonuses, separate from the contractually guaranteed four percent profit for the captain and two percent for the pilot. Trept thanked him profusely, Zajdar didn't even look at his letter.

Hieronem touched his arm.

"A peaceful old age?"

Ihmet made a gesture of protection from Al-Uzza.

"I hope not. But yes, you're right, Esthlos — I'm starting to count the time wasted. Weeks at sea... drops of blood in the hourglass of life, I feel each of them, they fall like stones, it sends a shiver down my spine."

"Regret?"

The Persian looked at Hieronem thoughtfully.

"I don't think so. No."

"What now? Family?"

"They forgot about me a long time ago."

"So?"

Zajdar pointed at Trept with his eyes, who was bantering with Kristoff.

"Devour the world like her. A little more, a little more."

Mr. Berbelek tasted the sickly sweet syrup.

"Mmm. As long as you have an appetite, right?"

The Persian leaned towards Hieronem.

"It's contagious, Esthlos."

"I think—"

"You can get infected, really. Take yourself a young lover. Have a son. Move into the crown of another kratistos. To the southern lands. More sun, more bright skies. Into the morph of youth."

Mr. Berbelek laughed throatily.

"I'm working on it!"

He took some nut paste; Zajdar thanked him with a gesture.

"As for the clear sky... the Villa near Cartagena. Val du Ploi, beautiful surroundings, very smooth keros. Would you be interested?

"I already have some land in Languedoc. But what did I just say? I'm not going to warm my bones in the garden just yet."

"Hmm, he doesn't work, he doesn't rest" Hieronim pursed his lips "So what will he actually do?"

Ihmet wiped his hands on a scarf the Skella doulos handed to him. He

opened the bank note, glanced at the amount, and snorted.

"Practice happiness."

Γ
Fatherhood

He had barely crossed the threshold of the house when he saw Porte smiling conspiratorially, Mr. Berbelek lost all hope of a peaceful evening and a return to sleepy inactivity.

"What now?" he muttered, frowning.

"They're upstairs, I've assigned them guest rooms." Porte caught the coat that had been thrown to him, he gestured upstairs with his thumb

"By Sheol, whom?"

The old man smiled crookedly and then, with an exaggerated bow, handed a letter to Mr. Berbelek.

Bresla, 1194-1-12

My dear Hieronim!,

They are your children, although you may no longer be their father. Do you remember your own childhood? I hope so.

They won't recognize you, so be gentle. Abel left every friend he ever had here, it was a great part of his dreams, Alithea changed Form this winter, it will be several years before she achieves entelechy, she is no longer a child, but not yet a woman; so be gentle.

Should I apologize to you? Sorry. I didn't want to, I don't want to put this on you, you were last on my list. In the end, it was a choice between you and Uncle Biota. Did I choose wrong?

Should I give you an oath of honesty? You knew me; now you only hold paper in your hand. I know well what truth will come in the keros, but I will write it anyway: the accusations you will hear are false. I didn't participate in the conspiracy, I didn't steal the burgrave's will, I wasn't aware of his illness.

Perhaps Yahweh will allow us to meet again someday. Maybe I'll survive. I am now escaping into the fire of the divine Anthos; perhaps when I am gone then you won't know me, and we won't know each other. There were moments, whole days, when I loved you so much that my heart ached and I lost my breath, and my skin burned. I mean - you know who I loved. You know, right? I hope you remember.

ϵ. Maria Latek π. Berbelek

Oh, she could write. He read the letter three times. She probably worked on it all day, she was always a perfectionist. At least since he knew her. Twenty years? Yes, it's been twenty years. In fact, he could have expected Maria to end up like this: running away from justice in the dark of night, a victim of her own intrigue, completely innocent in her eyes, ridding her life of unnecessary burdens with grace and lyrical lyrics, certain that the world would help her. From everything she knew about him now, Hieronim could have been some psychopathic cacomorph spreading the Warlock's filth among the people. Yet she sent her children to him.

Mr. Berbelek climbed up to the first floor. He already heard their voices in the corridor. Alithea laughed. He stood outside the guest room door. She was laughing and Abel was saying something in the background, too quiet to understand, but probably in Vistul. Tereza appeared on the stairs; Mr. Berbelek waved her away. She looked at him strangely. Did he eavesdrop on his own children? Yes, that's what he did. He waited for them to say something about him: father this, father that. But no, nothing. The few words he distinguished were about the city, clearly Vodenburg did not fit their idea of the capital of Neurgia. Alithea wasn't laughing anymore. Hieronem stroked the lacquered wood of the door with the back of his hand. Should he knock? He pressed his finger against his carotid artery. Calm your breathing, calm your heart - what are you concerned about, anyway? One two three four.

He came in. They were still in their traveling clothes, the boy was standing by the window, looking out at the city under the dark sky and the setting sun, the girl was half-lying on the bed, leafing through a book. They looked back at him, and only in this simultaneous movement did he see their family resemblance - one blood, one morph. Those deep-set eyes, very black, and the high cheekbones, the hard chin...

They looked at him indifferently, with only slight curiosity in their eyes.

"Hieronem Berbelek" he said.

They didn't understand right away.

"Are you... is that you?" Abel walked up to him. He was not yet fifteen years old and he was already taller than Hieronem. "It is you." He held out his hand. "I'm Abel."

"Yes." Mr. Berbelek steeled himself and energetically grabbed the offered hand, but his son's hug turned out to be stronger. "I know."

Then they fell under the power of the Silence. He wanted to open his mouth, but the form was stronger; he saw that Abel was also struggling helplessly. The boy smoothed his hair, scratched his cheek, straightened his cuff. Mr. Berbelek at least had control over his hands. He looked back at Alithea. She put the book down but didn't get out of bed. She looked at them both with a serious expression on her face.

Mr. Berbelek moved a chair away from the bureau. Sitting down, he leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees and intertwining his fingers. He was now on the same level as Alithea. They found themselves looking straight into each other's eyes; the more impossible it became to turn away, to look down. She was confused, a blush spread on her cheeks, neck, and cleavage; she bit her lower lip. Hmm, maybe this is the way out...?

Mr. Berbelek bit his tongue hard. It hurt like it should. He blinked away tears.

He saw from his daughter's face that she took it as a sign of his great emotion. He couldn't take it anymore and burst out laughing loudly.

The siblings exchanged glances in consternation. Just to be on the safe side,

Abel moved back to the window, away from his father.

“Yes,” Hieronim gasped, trying to control his laughter, “that’s exactly how I imagined our meeting!”

Of course he hadn’t imagined it at all. Not that he didn’t want this meeting; that would already mean that he was thinking about it - about them. Meanwhile, Abel and Alithea did not belong to his life at all, he had lost his children along with the old morph, Maria, and that career, those dreams, that past. Here in Vodenburg he was a childless bachelor.

What were his last memories of them: leaving Posen, Maria on the sleigh, sweat evaporating from the horses, Alithea and Abel sliding under the fur until only their heads peeked out from under the covers, the round, bright faces of silently amazed children, how old were they, five, six?

They wouldn’t recognize him anyway.

He took a breath, straightened himself, and controlled his face.

“I won’t pretend to be a prodigal father,” he said. ”I don’t know you, you don’t know me. I have no idea what your mother was doing in Bresla that she had to send you across half of Europe to surprise her ex-husband. Who, she claimed, she wouldn’t trust with a dog. But that’s not important. You are my children. I will take care of you as best I can. Of course you can live here. Maybe we’ll even become friends... Although probably not, eh, Abel?”

Abel looked at the floor.

”Er...”

”Exactly.” Mr. Berbelek then turned to his daughter, who was still looking at him with wide eyes. ”How many things did you bring with you?”

“Two traveling trunks, the rest is going by sea,” she recited breathlessly, as if hypnotized.

”What ship?”

”The ’Okusta’, I think.”

”I’ll check when the tide comes in, I’ll maybe need to buy you something in

the meantime. Don't worry about money, nothing will change here, and that's how I supported you until now. But your mother probably didn't tell you that."

"Yes." she said. Abel growled suddenly.

Mr. Berbelek nodded.

"I will count it against her. Forgive me for the venom I spit at her from time to time; I have been accumulating. Of course, I'm actually the Pig, and she is right. She seemed to be a good mother, right?"

Alithea turned away, falling onto the dark sierman bed. Her black hair completely obscured her face, but it didn't muffle the sound of sudden sobbing.

"She said she'd come back! Come back! Alive!

Abel stood between his father and his sister.

"You'd better leave now."

Mr. Berbelek left.

Going down to the kitchen, he placed his finger on his artery again. His breathing was even slower than his thoughts, he could barely push air out of his lungs. There was nothing to worry about. The mind should always rule over the heart, and the morph should always rule over the hyle.

In the kitchen, he announced dinner for three to Tereza and Agna in the large dining room on the ground floor. He went down to her after bathing and changing clothes, tying his still wet hair at the nape of his neck; he also slipped the old Locust signet ring onto his finger. He checked himself in the mirror: Mr. Berbelek was distinguished.

Neither Abel nor Alithea showed up for dinner. He ate alone. The pyroki fires cast motionless, honey-colored shadows on the walls and furniture. Each click of the cutlery made a dull crack. He listened to the sounds coming from his own mouth as he bit the meat and chewed the vegetables. They also seemed deafening, a wet roar ran up the jawbone to his ears and temples, until he almost had to close his eyes. He wasn't hungry, not after the sumptuous dinner served by Skella; but he ate, he had to eat. Thoughts wandered freely as the body submitted to the ritual. There was also business to take care of. Ihmet finally

agreed to at least find decent nimrods for NIB on permanent contracts. Esthlos Njute, of course, wanted to save Zajdar the commission owned to the agent, but Hieronem dissuaded him from doing so; Kristoff really has no sense at all. However, if the Persian does not find these replacements quickly, there will be nothing to keep him in Vodenburg. There is only one way to catch such a good nimrod quickly: by buying it from the competition. So Hieronim shouldn't let Zajdar out of his sight - you have to move, make commitments, face the necessity, do what needs to be done, money, money - tomorrow morning he will go to Skella's House, where Njute, Ikita & Berbelek are paying for Ihmet's room ...

Mr. Berbelek went to the library. He sank into a corner chair after lighting a candle. Tereza peeked through the ajar door, as she usually did before retiring, asking if the Esthlos needed anything, maybe a black thea - but no, he thanked her. The house fell into silence. Occasionally there was the sound of hooves clattering outside the windows as a night cab rolled along the cobblestone street; sometimes a human voice.

"Can I?"

Mr. Berbelek almost dropped his tobacco.

"Please."

Abel gently closed the library door behind him. Hieronim put the tobacco in the ashtray. He watched the forms the smoke took in the twilight. Abel took advantage of the opportunity and walked closer, stopping in front of the sculpture of Calliope half hidden by heavy curtains.

"She wants to go to Tolosa, to her aunt and uncle," he said.

Mr. Berbelek moved his hand in the air, the smoke swirling around his fingers.

"I'll pay for your trip."

"I'm not sure that is the good idea."

"Are you proud? Do you have any savings?"

"Going to Tolosa. I'm not sure. But you really want to get rid of us."

"You're not sure? A bit of a hasty decision, after one conversation. Don't you think?

Mr. Berbelek looked at his son. Abel only blinked once, but otherwise maintained his form.

"This will be the second conversation," said the Esthlos. "Are you hesitant?"

"You want to get rid of us."

Hieronim crushed the rest of the tobacco and then offered his son a chair near the bookcase. Abel sat down, looked at his father, stood up, moved his chair two steps closer, and sat down again.

Mr. Berbelek tapped the arm of the chair with his Locust signet ring.

He looked at the boy through half-closed eyes.

"You're probably right," he muttered. "I would probably make the same call... Can you stand a bit of stale honesty?

"Please."

"I am no father, Abel. I am no man at all, a man cut in half and reassembled from the remains, that's all that's left. I'm not feeling sorry for myself right now; I tell it like it is. This is what survived of Hieronim Berbelek after Kolenica... The rubble and ash you see here. Some of the Warlock's filth. So there's probably a bit of selfishness in that too. Nevertheless, it would also be for your good to get away from my morph, however weak, but blood makes you vulnerable, so escape as quickly as possible while the clay is still hard. I think so. I wasn't convinced, but when I saw you..." He made a slow gesture with his left hand, the one with the signet ring, as if outlining the boy's figure in the twilight. "How old are you?"

"Sixteen. Almost."

"Yes. Alithea turned fourteen."

"In Decembris."

"This is a dangerous age, a person is most susceptible then, you have to be extremely careful what type of morph you live in and what you absorb. You

wouldn't want to recognize that imprint in twenty years" he clenched his hand into a fist and lowered it to the railing. "My imprint"

Abel was clearly confused. He shifted on the seat of the chair and scratched his head; his gaze kept moving away from his father - towards the sculptures, books, and colorful pyrokic lampshades.

"I don't know, maybe you're right. But" he lost his words and began again. "But it always works both ways: if you have changed so much, if cancer has taken so much, whose morph will restore and rebuild more of the real Hieronim Berbelek, if not the morph of his children?"

Mr. Berbelek was clearly surprised.

"I don't really know what you're thinking. I'm sorry, but this is not a fairy tale: you come, you save your father, a happy family, heroic children."

"Why not?" Abel leaned towards Hieronem. "Why not? Don't dogs resemble their owners, owners resemble their dogs, spouses resemble each other, don't women living under one roof bleed around the same Moon? While the child is the eidolon of the parent, the parent is the eidolon of the child.

"Have you been thinking about this for a long time?" The Esthlos snorted. "What have you deluded yourself of?"

Abel let out a breath. He hunched over, looking between his feet.

"Nothing."

Mr. Berbelek also leaned forward. He squeezed his son's shoulder. The boy didn't look up.

"What?" Hieronim repeated, much quieter, almost in a whisper.

Abel shook his head.

Mr. Berbelek did not insist. He waited. The clock in the lobby slowly rang eleven. A drunk sang a dirty counting song, finally the city guard picked him up, they also heard it in the night silence. Every moment something creaked and creaked in the dark house, the breath of the old building. Mr. Berbelek did not release his hand.

"In Bresla, in the Academy library" Abel grumbled. "When I studied the history of Polan... After all, it all comes down to the recent history, to the world around around us. The teacher recommended Kreszczow's *The Fourth Dream of the Warlock*. You are, you are in the index.

"Ach. Of course."

"*The Siege of Kolencia, 1183*, the whole chapter. Kreszczow calls you 'The Greatest Strategos of our time'. I heard it earlier of course from mother. —"

"Oh?"

Abel blushed. "I thought to myself: I was conceived with his seed, with his Form, what's more natural? It is a noble dream to follow in the footsteps of your father. Strategos Abel Latek's. You will laugh."

"My father, your grandfather, was a clerk of the Burgrave."

"You will laugh."

"No. You've got the money, you're the one who talked Maria into sending you to me, right? Although she didn't want to. In the end, you probably made her think that way, so well that she convinced herself that it was her idea from the beginning."

Abel shrugged. Mr. Berbelek let go of his son's hand, and sat up straight. Something was breaking down in him, a convective current of emotions was forming, something he did not dare to call ambition — an announcement of a great hunger for satisfaction, a desire for pride. "I could still be great! I could rise again under the heavens! In Abel's body. Because only the Form is immortal. I could!. I can!"

"I don't really know how you could imagine." he muttered indifferently. "You see who I am now. I'd rather be a child like you than you grow up to be like me."

"I don't think so."

"You don't think so"

"When you walked into the room, for a second or two, we couldn't take our eyes off you. It is like how the stars and planets rotate around the Earth."

"You'd better go to sleep, you're starting to recite poetry. What are your plans for tomorrow?"

"Mmm, see the city, of course."

THE princely city of Vodenburg was founded in 439 of the Alexandrian Era as a river fort at the mouth of the Meuse, ensuring the safety of inland navigation and collecting tolls for the local Macedonian governor. The fishing settlements that previously existed here were destroyed by repeated invasions - today there is no trace left of either these settlements or the original Roman fort.

In the first centuries after the Fall of Rome, during the Kratistos Wars, when the political and hylomorphic balance was being established in Europe and Alexandrian Africa, Vodenburg gained in importance due to the furious morphing of the Rhine basin. There was a front then, an area where the crowns of kratistoi overlapped. For many years the land was uninhabitable and the Rhine unsuitable for navigation.

Until the seventh century A.D., Vodenburg remained only the capital of a minor province of the Frankish kingdom.

Only after the year 653, after the exile of the Kratista Illeia, when the grip of the Kratista on the keros of Europe weakened slightly, did Neurgia achieve relative independence. Its capital gained importance over time as one of the main merchant cities of Europe. For several centuries, it was even the residence city of a minor kratistos, who entered the gap between the anthos of neighboring Powers. The power of Gregory the Grim's Form allowed Vodenburg to completely eclipse the border towns on the Rhine and the southern Frankish cities.

The colonization of Herdon and the beginning of large-scale trans-okeanic trade ushered in an era of prosperity. An academy was opened, one of the first air pig productions in the north was launched, the fame and products of the local glassworks reached the farthest corners of the world. The shipyards were working at full speed, the Persian, Jewish and Gothic districts were growing continuously. Teknitoi of high arts and crafts, mathematicians and alkemics were drawn here from everywhere - after all, it was in Vodenburg that Ire Gauke invented the pneumaton. Vodenburg was also the third city, after Alexandria and Moscow, where the streets were installed with a pyrokian lighting system...

Currently, the prince is pushing a project with a high poll tax to finance the intense morphing of the keros of all Neurgia towards the Calokagatic Form, the perfection of mind and body that was freely enjoyed by the residential cities of the more altruistic kratistoi. Neurgia would have to pay a fortune for this, hiring entire teams of teknitoi for years of hard work. The project made the prince himself very popular among the common people, but the aristocracy, the aristocracy and the wealthy merchants who largely rule Vodenburg - they use the services of body teknitoi anyway, and they fear the inevitable influx of immigrants from all over northwestern Europe to under the benevolent Form. The city, known in Europe as the Vagabond Capital, is already bursting at the seams.

Anton talked about all this as he led the siblings through the streets of Vodenburg while bathed in the morning light.

Abel and Alithea had intended to go alone, but Mr. Berbelek insisted; first he wanted to give them the carriage, and finally - because he had to go elsewhere on business - It was agreed they be accompanied by Porte's son. Anton took a long "please" stick and a guard whistle with him. The first thing they did was to head towards the port - the panoramic view and the slope of the ground lead to a sea of all things undecided. But since they turned every time something caught Abel's or Alithea's interest, they soon found themselves in the heart of the new Persian quarter, on a wide, straight palm avenue, among the elaborate architecture of Arab houses, decorated with colorful patterns on white limestone; the rounded gnomon of the minarets rose above the flat roofs.

They saw live palm trees for the first time, previously they had only known them from books. Alithea walked over and ran her hands over the rough trunk.

"They don't grow anywhere else in this circle of Earth, do they?" Abel frowned. "Is this some kind of variety morphed to be more resistant to frost?"

"No, probably not," Anton replied. "There are plenty of Ishmaelite demiurgoi and teknitoi everywhere around here, for example, this is the house of Hajba ibn Hassay, the prince's jeweler; so they can safely plant palm trees, dates, and oranges. Indeed, the air in the area seemed a little warmer, anyway, it definitely smelled different. Abel tried to distinguish the exotic scents: incense? cinnamon? biekszta? Of course, they were also surrounded by the usual smell of a city, that is, the stench, the stench of a great crowd of people and human dwellings squeezed into a small space. Carts were rattling along the avenue,

dozens and hundreds of passers-by were walking quickly, most of them in traditional Ishmaelite julbabs, jibs, shalwars and tarbooshes. There were women in robes, blindingly colorful, and decorated with jewelry both heavy and tacky. The Muslims could be recognized by their tattoos and skin morphs.

"I'd like to see it someday."

"What?"

"This country of theirs. Palm trees, sun, lions. Well, you know. Deserts, pyramids."

"Scorpions, manticores, efreets, hyenas, vultures, jinn, lice, lizards, mosquitoes and malaria."

Alithea stuck her tongue out at her brother.

He stopped himself from reciprocating her face at the last moment. I have to stop this, I'm not a child anymore. Does a strategos fool around in public, banter with his sister? A strategos maintains a haughty silence.

Of course, this was also somewhat infantile. Don't children play strategos and ares, kratistos and king, they don't pretend to be serious, which makes this pretending even more funny? So shame was inevitable: whether he followed his instincts or went against them. He looked away, blinking rapidly.

But he remembered what his mother had said so often. Especially when he complained about how they were late everywhere because of her endless efforts in front of the mirror - this was her favorite answer back then, recited without even thinking, but no less true in its banality.

"Character comes from developed habits. Whoever you pretend to be, as long as you are consistent enough, that's who you will eventually become. This is what distinguishes us from animals and lower beings, their Form always comes from outside, they are unable to change themselves." She smiled at him in the silver reflection over her shoulder. "Don't groan, have patience. There are always beautiful women you'll be waiting for."

His mother developed the habit of beauty. She did not allow herself to be neglected even for a moment. Even when she was not going anywhere on an official visit, to a party , a ball, or even when receiving guests herself, she did not

deviate even for a moment from her pre-planned image of herself. Her beauty was sometimes overwhelming. Abel had never fully overcome the pious shyness with which he had entered her rooms as a child. The bedroom, the dressing room, the bathroom, the study - this is where her anthos bit the deepest. The air was always filled with a characteristic mixture of irritating and nauseating odors, a stuffy suspension of exotic perfumes and flowers overflowing from window vases. Sounds immediately disappeared and were muffled. There were no right angles or sharp edges. All objects either turned out to be, in fact, delicate assemblages of many smaller elements, or they had already disintegrated into a thousand tiny trinkets, or where in the process of doing so, they were detached, dismembered, lost in their own ornaments. His mother emerged from among them in the rustle of her lace dresses, preceded by the blurred glow of their bright colors and the intoxicating scent of her perfume, the black-haired queen, the heart of his heart. What could he do in the face of such a Form?

He couldn't believe he had managed to convince his mother to do anything. Father is wrong - she must have been thinking about sending them to Vodenburg from the very beginning. It's true that it wasn't easy for him to read her intentions, she never discussed them with him (maybe she did with Alithea?), he was used to surprises. She managed their lives with a velvet despotism. It was the same in the last days before departure -mother and them. Suddenly, many people Abel had never seen before began to appear in the house, at strange hours, in strange clothes, with strange morphs - fear, anger, hatred, despair. He saw them through half-open doors, in reflections of the mirror across the bend in the corridor, as they moved quickly to and from his mother's rooms, sometimes even without the company of a maid. Alithea believed that they were messengers, that her mother entrusted them with some secret letters. But sometimes there was also something more: he managed to see a poorly dressed woman and an old Babylonian (his origins recognized his by his beard and six fingers) as they left mother's office, clutching heavy, oblong packages in their hands. The next day, Abel heard rumors in the gymnasium that the Burgrave had actually been murdered, and that it was all a plot of foreign aristocrats. When he got home, mother was already packing up. Alithea was sitting on the stairs and biting her fingers. She says she's going to be arrested. She says she has to run away. We too. But not with her. She'll send us. "Where to?"- "Far away from here." Then Abel thought of Hieronim Berbelek in the heart of Vodenburg, which was like a revelation: an opportunity! father the strategos! I am the son of a legend! Mother listened to his arguments, groans and screams,

continuing to pack, scribbling something at the secretary's desk and urging the servants. Finally, she said they would talk about it tomorrow. She kissed his forehead and pushed him out the door. In the morning it turned out that she had left at night, taking only two bags, not even in a carriage, but on a horse with a groom. Abel and Alithea's luggage has already been loaded onto a river barge. A short letter was waiting for them. You will go to Vodenburg and your father will take care of you. The house has already been sold and the money had been distributed. So They went.

So did he really give his mother an idea she wouldn't have thought of otherwise? Whom did he persuade to do anything with his hour-long lamentations? Either way, there was none of the subtlety that Hieronim attributed to Abel's actions. Only childish stubbornness. He remembered that he had been very careful not to reveal his true motives - and that he had made a fool of himself in his own eyes. In the clash with her Form, in a mother's anthos - he will always be a child, nothing more. How could father not know this?

I will let him think that I have managed to bend my mother to my will - but it is not true, it is not true.

"There was a big fire here in eighty-seven," Anton continued, "the entire district burned down to the ground, back then they built mostly using wood. Nothing can be changed in the Old City, but in the new quarters the prince had ordered greater distances between buildings, a minimum width of streets, and a ban on open fires in poor housing estates, although no one, of course, observes this. There were riots near the steelworks then, a rumor spread that one of the demiurgoi of Fire had an Ishmaelite woman here and, you see, he got too hot that night, heh, heh, heh. Back in '89... No, please don't give them any money, they're diseased!"

A cacomorphic beggar came up to her - a third ear on his forehead, bones piercing the skin, a long tail, mucus leaking from gills - and, stammering, he began to beg Alithea for a penny, half a penny even, if you please. Anton chased him away by hitting his calves with the stick.

No wonder he was harassing Alithea: even in her traveling clothes (because the "Okusta" and the rest of their wardrobe had not arrived yet) she attracted attention, focused the eyes of passers-by, a true daughter of Maria Latek. Isn't this the immortality promised to men? From father to son, from mother to daughter - that which does not die, the way of speaking, the way of thinking,

the way of moving, the way of showing feelings and hiding them, the way of life, purpose, humanity. The morph is as unique as a writing style, it is imprinted like a seal in wax, as much on a woman as a man. Provega rightly corrected Aristotle: Form is above sex and the strength of the seed depends on the Form, not the other way around. Now just look at Alithea: hair intricately braided in eight braids, dark navy blue lace around her neck, fingerings made of the same lace, a half-laced Mitanni kaftan, Egyptian linen flowing along the shoulders in overlapping folds, white on blue, on white, wide, A black shalwar held tightly around the waist by a multi-folded belt, and leather boots exactly four tuks high. Abel bet that the perfume she used today belonged to her mother, he knows that scent; and he certainly recognizes the look with which Alithea sees the beggar away, a gesture of an elevated chin, with her back straight and shoulders pulled back, eyebrows furrowed - now he won't stick his tongue out, now he's someone else.

Did mother teach her all this? No, certainly not; this is not taught. It was enough that Alithea was often with her, that she lived in her aura.

I want nothing less from my father.

"Do you always beat beggars here?" she asked Anton coldly. The servant grinned.

"Indeed, Esthle, beggars beat passers-by much more often."

They sat down for a moment in the garden of an Amidian tavern. Anton ordered the Cappadocian pomelo with wild honey. He pointed to the paintings covering the walls of the tavern and the colors of the sign above the entrance.

"'Under the Fourth Sword.' Countries such as Neurgia, balancing on the edge of the Anthos of Powers, are not overwhelmed by any morph, so they attract exiles of all stripes, the disinherited, landless and masterless, members of non-existent nations, lost diasporas." The servant was enjoying his own story. He was probably repeating the words of some Esthlos, but his foreign idioms betrayed him. "After Grzegorz escaped, we experienced a real flood of them here. I think that's when Pergamon fell...

"One thousand one hundred and thirty-nine," Abel added, putting down his glass. Is this still history or is it politics? This is probably where the distinction lies. In general, as Praeceptor Janosz says, history is politics told in the

past tense. Abel was a diligent student. The partition of the kingdom of The Third Pergamon completed the alliance of New Babylon with the Urals. Like the thorny cogs of an iron makina, the crowns of the Seven-Fingers and the Warlock slammed into the Seleucidite lands. Once upon a time, the Kratista Jezebel the Merciful resided in Amida, preserving the ancient Form of the kingdom of Pergamon; she was the first to escape. The kingdom was torn in half, the Amidan province fell to the Warlock, and the Pergamon province to the Seven-Fingers. The Seleucidites were cut down. Among the Pergamon diaspora were legends about a surviving descendant of royal blood who one day - as in all legends of this type -will once again sit on the throne of Amida; After all, the Seleucidites had already returned once and ended the rule of the Attalids! Meanwhile, the exiles tried to maintain and pass on the morph of the non-existent nation to their children- which was only possible far from their homeland, which was slowly, generation by generation, being eaten away by the auras of the invaders. But even here, even in multicultural Vodenburg, the refugees were not safe. Language, clothing, cuisine, sacred colors and rhyme are used to preserve themselves. But in the end, they too will lose their morph when the next generation born abroad turns out to be more Neurgian-Amidian than Amidian-Neurgian. This is how nations die.

From the palm avenue they descended into the lower suburbs. In the shady streets there was one large perpetual suq. It seemed that every inhabitant of this district was trading something, selling something, or at least was ready to sell it if the slightest interest in his clothes, house, belongings, or children was expressed. Goods were placed on stairs, in windows, on balconies, directly on the ground or in makeshift stalls. Anton quickly explained that here they really believe in "fools' stalls" - that only a fool would come over and bargain directly. All you need to do is start a conversation with the trader, just let him touch you, hold your hand and without him saying anything you will notice and an hour pass and be left with a pile of unnecessary things, having spent all your money, down to the last penny. As Neurgian folk wisdom says, every second Ishmaelite is a demiurgos of greed. Here, in Vodenburg, you can meet Persians, Indians, Arabs; Sahelians and Aegyptians who came straight from under the Nebuchadnezzar sun. Neurgians still see them as exotic magi who can easily bend the ordinary, "clay" people to their morphs. It was not clear whether Anton shared this belief or not as he spoke at length about Vodenburg customs and explained their rituals. You should buy through an intermediary or at least keep an appropriate distance, say nothing, and only point to specific items with

a long stick. Abel and Alithea conveyed their orders to Anton in whispers. Each time he started by pointing to a completely different item. The crowd at this hour was so large that the brother and sister often changed their minds, unsure of their desires under the swollen keros.

So from street to street, from square to square, and around the corner there was always something even more attractive - it looked like they would never get out. No one is completely immune to the suq morph, even a poor person can be caught in the web of helpless desires; especially the poor person. Anton purchased, among other things, a slender Gothic-style kanjar made of black, purine steel, with a handle carved in the shape of a sacred cobra's head (for Abel), a wooden Pythagorean cube and a set of ankle bracelets, allegedly dating back to the Sea Peoples invasion in the first century (for Alithea).

They would probably have wandered like that until dusk, if not for a sudden movement of the crowd that carried them along - a human river pouring out from between the buildings straight onto the northern meadow. Before they realized what the people around them were talking about, what excited children were shouting as they overtook them in droves, they were already in the front row of onlookers, embraced by the same morph of disinterested curiosity, staring at the slow march of carts and animals.

In the front row walked elegantly elegant morphezoons: Indian Berbers and Babylonian behemoths, covered in fur with crimson stripes arranged in spiral patterns. Yellow banners with stylized inscriptions in Prakrit hung from giant Berber tusks, almost sweeping the ground. On the backs of the elephants, on the necks and behind the shoulder blades, sat half-naked riders, slim men and women of an Asian morph, whom Abel guessed were tamers, demiurgoi of animals. They had grey-brown skin and long black hair tied in thick knots; dozens, hundreds of flies and other insects walked on them, clouds of insects swirled over their heads and then scattered around the bodies of the beasts. Complex harnesses were placed on the crude heads of the perpetually hunched behemoths, covering their eyes and piercing them with rows of hooks and chains through the wrinkled skin and hard bone, into the inside of their mouths and into the center of their angular skulls. The behemoths were originally morphed for war, and still, in all their variations, were prone to sudden, unexpected fits of fury, in which they lunged forward, crushing, trampling, and smashing everything in their path; and since they were also morphed to be extremely difficult to kill, only immediately butchering the animal's brain was guaranteed

to stop the charge. The tamers should theoretically be able to control the behemoths, but most civilized countries did not allow them within their borders without a "death harness" on. With each step of the pair of beasts, thump, thump, the earth shook with them - timid gasps escaped from the mouths of the onlookers and the line of the crowd undulated, half a step forward, half a step back, Abel and Alithea were with everyone else; Abel squeezed his sister's arm as they followed the animals with symmetric gazes. Next, behind the morphezoons, were tall carts pulled by multiple teams of cattle. Acrobats, jugglers, demiurgoi of fire, water, air and iron; illusionists and magi presented their skills on open platforms. Along the caravan, at its very end, disappearing in clouds of dust on the road descending from the northern hills, to the front that curved on the meadows, were horsemen trotting on slender-legged zebras, raising short shouts in hoarse voices in several broken languages alternately, and waving Dzunguon torches from which they fired fountains of colorful sparks.

Abel couldn't make out the words being shouted, but he didn't have to. He laughed softly, tilting his head towards Alithea, the morph of child-like fascination drawing them closer.

"The circus is here!"

△
The God in The Circus

The Circus Aberrato K'Ire, boasting a tradition dating back to the Roman pandaimoniums and proclaiming itself the greatest traveling spectacle in Europe, began its circumcontinental journey in the spring, following the northern coast of Franconia, with Vodenburg as the fifth city on its route.

The circus was really big: two hundred people, half a thousand animals, several dozen massive carts. It spread out on the Vodenburg grounds in a concentric constellation of colorful tents, leaving an empty arena circle in the middle. At night, three high poles were dug into the ground for the acrobats. Cages and pens with animals were organized into a closed menagerie on the northern side of the camp; Onlookers who wanted to get a closer look at exotic fauna were charged half a penny each. Aberrato earned and Aberrato spent - he paid large sums to the Vodenburg weatherman, Old Remigius of the Tangled Tower, to at least try to ensure a few rainless days. In the case of port cities, one could never be sure, especially in ports so busy, with ships constantly entering and leaving the bay. Nevertheless, on the first day of performances, the sky was cloudless, a warm breeze blew from the east and Mr. Berbelek allowed himself to be dragged out of the house without much resistance. Perhaps did he really want to please his son and daughter? Alithea smiled uncertainly as she thanked him - a long look from under her black eyelashes, the dimples in her cheeks, embarrassed, and unconsciously winding her braids on her fingers - and a cold claw tore Hieronim's heart.

Traditionally, the western quarter of the auditorium was intended for wealthier townspeople, that is, those who could afford to pay for a seat. There were several rows of armchairs and chairs, somewhat worn-out, and a dozen benches behind them; the remaining spectators had to crowd against the high barriers surrounding the arena. Most of the show was to take place above ground level - either on poles with ropes stretched between them, or on a stage hastily assembled by circus craftsmen, five or six pous high, where local actors now performed their wailgarn pantomimes before the Aberrato performances began. However, animal shows and some of the arts of the elemental demiurgoi cannot be performed anywhere else but downstairs, in the earthen arena, and those standing further away will not see them. Mr. Berbelek paid an extra dozen or so and got four seats in the first row. Four - he wanted to combine pleasure with duty and invited Ihmet Zajdar. People always came to these types of events in Vodenburg a little earlier, treating them as social events. Heironim hoped to use the time to discuss the company's affairs with him, especially since Abel and Alithea had just run off.

However, as soon as the men sat down, lit their cigarettes and exchanged a few words, the loud voice of Ryter Kristoff Njute hit them from behind:

"Aha! Aaah! So you came too! I was also thinking about getting you out! Where are your children? Wait, let's sit down. You know Esther, Paul and Luisa. But-but, meet, my dears, our nimrod, Ihmet Zajdar, Ihmet Zajdar, someone move this stool, come on, sit down, sit down, phew, it's terribly stuffy, you're sweating like in a bathhouse, I'll make a deal with this sclerotic Remigius, remember? When we ordered these storms to be calmed down in '91, I bet the son of a bitch caused them himself..."

Kristoff had showed up with his wife, Esther, his daughter, and son-in-law. This was to be expected - and as Mr. Berbelek remembered well from his visits to Njute's house - the family was silent in his presence, only the Ryter speaking. Paul had the greatest chance of breaking the form, as he was not related to Kristoff and was under his influence for the shortest time. Indeed, from time to time he managed to contribute a sentence or two.

Mr. Berbelek let Kristoff speak, what sensible person tries to stop a waterfall? But he no longer paid attention to the words and didn't register the content. Kristoff addressed Zajdar, and the Persian smiled at him politely and nodded. Heironim's eyes wandered around the fields, between the wagons, tents,

above the heads of the crowd and into the crowd. The spectators arrived slowly, and with them - sellers of flowers, umbrellas, fans, sweets, wine, clumsy stools, pickpockets, beggars and shady body demiurgoi, all loudly praising their goods and services, the noise of people's voices covered the grounds like a thick blanket. The bigger the crowd, and as more people gathered, the more impatient and excited Mr. Berbelek felt about the upcoming spectacle. He realized that much of the pleasure derived from such performances comes not from the miracles and wonders being witnessed, but from the fact that one is witnessing them together with others, dozens, hundreds of other people. It is no wonder that actors who go on stage in front of a hostile audience become mute and paralyzed. They would have to be high aristocrats to be able to break away from the situation, reverse the situation, and win the audience back to their side...

Mr. Berbelek flinched, his eyes focused on the side railings, a hand with tobacco hovered right next to his mouth. Esthle Shulima Amitace is here - he enters the private section of the audience after paying the guard and sending his slave away. She caught Hieronim's gaze and responded with a wave of her fan and a slight smile. Mr. Berbelek stood up and bowed to her across the rows of still empty chairs and benches. She had no choice but to approach him. Njute followed Hieronim's gaze and interrupted his speech; now everyone was watching the woman approach in silence. But her eyebrow didn't even twitch, her secret half-smile didn't change one iota, she didn't quicken her step or stiffen her movements, their gaze couldn't change her in any way.

Mr. Berbelek tossed down and stamped out the lit tobacco; he clasped his hands behind his back like intertwined steel, and bowed slightly. Without taking his eyes off the Esthle, he began to count his heartbeats. She's beautiful, she's beautiful, she's beautiful. I desire, I desire. Those green eyes looking only at me, those long fingers gripping my arm, those light gold locks under my hand, those tall breasts under my lips, those smiling lips - not smiling, shouting obscenities under the morph of my desire. Come to me!

"Esthle."

"Esthlos."

She gave him her hand. He kissed the inside of her wrist, leaning down slightly (she was taller than him). Her hot skin burned his lips, the emerald eyes of the snake bracelet looked straight into his eyes. He also recognized the scent of the Nile, a hot, animal scent, both pleasant and irritating.

"Allow me to introduce my wife Esthle," Kristoff began, clearing his throat.

They sat down. A seller of sweet tulips passed between the rows of the audience and Mr. Berbelek bought half a dozen for Abel and Alithea. Shulima puffed out her cheeks. He handed her one of the fried flowers. She bit down, licking her lips quickly; a single sugar-coated petal fell on her chest. Mr. Berbelek stretched out his left hand, slowly took the petal between his thumb and forefinger, raised his hand, put the petal on his tongue, and bit it, the sweetness ran down his throat, he swallowed. Esthle Amitace remained motionless for this time, watching him carefully, only her breasts heaving lightly to the rhythm of her calm breathing, a wet trace of the petal remained above her dark nipple.

"I didn't know you were a Kristian," Njute said, breaking Esthlos Berbelek and Esthle Amitace's sudden intimacy; it forced everyone else into an awkward silence. He pointed to Shulima's necklace with a silver cross.

"Oh, no." She lifted the pendant, as if looking at it for the first time. "It's a broken cross. It had already been used for magic and rituals several thousand years before Alexander."

As usual, as he listened to her voice, Mr. Berbelek tried to identify Shulima's accent. Her voice was soft, with stretched vowels and irregular breaths, as if she was speaking only to you and speaking in secret, suppressing her voice from others. A man was involuntarily leaning towards her, tilting his head.

"Are you interested in ancient cults, Esthle?" Mr. Berbelek interjected, trying to keep the conversation going.

Shulima looked at him over the fan.

"These are still dangerous matters," she said.

"Dangerous?"

"Old gods don't go away that easily," Ihmet Zajdar observed. "You're left with this feeling that they were more... real after all."

"The blood of goats and howling at the moon," Kristoff muttered contemptuously.

Esthle Amitace sighed loudly.

"Do we really have to talk about this now? We came here to have fun, not to engage in religious discussions."

"Beauty always attracts attention," Mr. Berbelek smiled, pointing to the silver gammadion between the Esthle's breasts.

"It's a pity," gasped Esthlos Njute. "For a moment I hoped that I had met a sister in faith. But there must be a reason why you chose such a cross, Esthle, since you know its origins."

"Does taste determine one's choice of religion? No offense, but I couldn't flaunt the image of an instrument of torture like that, there's some perversion in that."

"Ho, ho, ho, I won't have that!" The Ryter of Jerusalem waved his hands. "Such judgments are spread by those who know little about the religion itself, so they repeat what they have heard, they arise, like gossip, from nothing, from a combination of random words, the shallowest associations, from a vague form. What do you even know about Kristos, Esthle?"

"Hmm, a Jewish Kratistos from the fourth century of Alexandria, still among the wild kratistoi, obsessed with the local Jewish cult, sentenced to crucifixion for a political cause, managed to draw many Jews under his Form. Apparently he didn't die on that cross, he maintained his body. What else? He seems to have claimed some kinship with God."

"He was, He is His son."

"I have never had much respect for these gods" said Shulima with a slight ironic smile. "Where is the body, and ambitions, the desires and complexes, the enemies, the friends and lovers, dozens of children, everything human? Humanity times a hundred does not equal divinity."

"It's actually Allah, the God of the Muslims," Mr. Berbelek interjected. "Right?"

Kristoff grabbed his head. "Kriste! What are you talking about! Muhammad stole Him from us, he got confused in the anthos of Al-Kaba, and this is how it turned out for the Ishmaelites, everything got twisted."

"Ah, so this is Aristotle's God after all?" Szulima asked. "Well, I don't

understand anything anymore. How could He have a son? What for? What's the point? It doesn't add up." She pursed her lips and ate the rest of the tulip.

Kristoff snorted loudly.

He'll soon start tearing that red hair out of his head, Hieronim thought.

"I always thought so," Ihmet interjected, squinting as he looked thoughtfully over the heads of Berbelek and Amitace at the setting Sun. "Since childhood in fact... it's like the roundness of the Earth or the flow of blood in the body, every person comes to it sooner or later by simply observing the world and drawing conclusions. Also people before Aristotle. The questions are always the same. Why is the world the way it is? Why is it there at all? What came before, where did it come from, what are the Causes? Could it be different, and if so, what, and if not, why not? We see how complex forms emerge from simple forms, how a thought is born from the void, how a complex artifact is created from a shapeless serum under the hand of a demiurgos. Therefore, for the world there must also be a Purpose, a Perfect Form, an ultimate cause which itself has no cause, because then we would have to go back to infinity. Therefore, if the universe, time, and existence have a beginning at all, it is just such a beginning: causeless, complete, closed in itself, perfect. From it come all Forms, it attracts originally formless Matter towards shapes closer and closer to Him: planets, stars, moons - where would they come from in their ideal shapes, in perfectly circular orbits, if not from the imposed morph of this kratistos of kratistoi? — seas and lands, mud and stones, plants and animals, and people and thinking people, and among them demiurgoi, teknitoi, kratistoi, increasingly closer to Him. We all live in His anthos, the entire universe is inside His aura and with each moment it is more similar to the Target Form, more and more concrete, shaped, perfect, divine. For in the end there will only be one Substance: Him."

The Persian spoke softly, pausing often to find the right word, and when he finished, he smiled apologetically.

"Oh, I didn't know you were such a sophistes!" Kristoff shook his head.

"Weeks, months in the middle of Okeanus..." the nimrod shrugged. "What is left? Stare at the horizon? A person will either go crazy or achieve a certain eudaimonia, peace of mind, hmm, wisdom."

"Alright" sighed Shulima, breaking the congealing morph of the moment

"but what about this God, Kristian? Perfection does not interfere in the affairs of mortals, it is enough that it exists."

"Aha!" Njute held up a straight finger. "Can perfection have feelings? Pity, for example? Compassion, mercy, love?"

Esthle Amitace frowned doubtfully. "Here we go again, adding human characteristics to the abstractions. We will end up with Zeus or Hera."

"Because you, Esthle, are talking about a God who would be logically consistent, and I'm talking about a God who can be believed in."

Shulima made a vague gesture with her fan.

"After all, it's one and the same. Who believes in a square circle? Besides, what God was Mr. Zajdar talking about just now?"

"I admit that as a child of Zoroasterism" The nimrod said "I am closer to the God of Muhammad than to Kristus. This whole thing about sending His child to Earth, supposedly to die, At least, into suffering, into danger —"

"Oh, this is where I see the cruel truth!" Shulima laughed mockingly, hiding her face behind the blue fan. "The problem lies elsewhere. Well, first you would have to accept God is already humanized, not the absolute Form of Aristotle, which is the most obvious guess - but rather something from those ancient fairy tales, the Sui of Staica, the Mother of Love and Fertility, the Bloody Warrior. One has a mind that leans more towards geometric wisdom, the other - towards beautiful stories that send shivers down your skin. But no God can be both at the same time."

"How can we, mortals, know what God may or may not be like, eh?" The Ryter huffed.

"We don't know much at all," Shulima admitted. "But we advance from ignorance towards perfection not by accepting irrational hypotheses, but by accepting those which, in our ignorance, seem to us the simplest and most reasonable of all."

"But I wasn't making any assumptions, Esthle" said Kristoff. He clearly had given up the tone of slight defiance and the distance in which the discussion had been conducted so far. "I believe."

"You were right, he made a huge impact and took many people with him, no one denies that he was a powerful kratistos. Even if he actually died on that cross. But is this a reason to make it a symbol of religion? What if they sentenced him to quartering and he died anyway? Then what?Axes, saws, knives?"

"You don't understand!" Njute, frustrated, stood up and sat down, tugged at his beard, at his mustache, stood up again, sat down again. "It was redemption! He died for our sins!"

"Well, this is completely absurd!" Amitace also lost her previous calm, sharp irritation sounded in her voice. "Imagine such a king, an absolute ruler: vassals break his law, vassals cause him pain, so instead of them, he punishes his child. Does someone stand above him, impose rules, determine the amount of necessary suffering? No, the king's word is always the final verdict. So what is the only reason for the son's torment? Because the king wanted it. It clearly gave him pleasure."

Kristoff's face, already drenched in sweat, turned even redder as he opened his mouth to roar: "what kind of febrile idiocy do you have here"

"Enough!" Shulima hissed, folding her fan with a crack; the hand outlined the horizontal gaps, a gesture of smoothing the keros.

Please behold, the Jerusalemite has fallen silent. Exhaling, he leaned back in his chair, suddenly relaxed, his eyes absently scanning the opposite part of the circus audience. The Njute family watched silently, confused.

After a while, Kristoff took a scarf from his sleeve and wiped his forehead.

When he looked back at Shulima, it was no longer possible to read anything on his face.

"Esthle." He bowed his head.

She responded with a polite inversion of her fan.

What was that? — Mr. Berbelek was wondering in the meantime. He exchanged surprised glances with Ihmet. The nimrod also seemed amused by the whole situation. Perhaps teknitoi finds such things funny — and perhaps this amusement is also just a mask — Mr. Berbelek, however, remembered the

Warlock's bone-breaking and thought-shattering frost too well. — Who the hell is she? With this morph, she can indeed bend ministers and aristocrats to his will. Is Bruge really her uncle, or did she just convince him to say so? I myself - did I really want to invite her to the Iberian villa then? Now - I desire, I desire, she is beautiful - now would I dare to go against her, to break the form, for example to ask some question - very inappropriate, very direct, very rude - could I do it or not?

He wasn't allowed to find out. Here Abel and Alitea appeared, returning from visiting the Aberrato K'Ire menagerie, and Mr. Berbelek began the ritual of introducing them to the Njute family, Zajdar and Amitace — very calmly, very politely: Esthle Alithea Latek thygater Berbeleka, Esthlos Abel Latek yjos Berbelek.

They sat down on opposite sides, Abel next to Louise and Paul, Alithea next to Shulima and Ihmet.

Alithea turned out to be an extremely talkative person in company, descriptions of beautiful, strange and monstrous creatures immediately began to pour out of her in a twittering flow, in some strange way she was both funny and distinguished, childish and adult beyond her years.

Mr. Berbelek watched her for a moment, confused. I will never know her. Is this the real morph of Alithea-among-the-people? They are my children, but I am not their father.

He leaned towards Kristoff.

"You'd better refrain from such actions in the future" he whispered. "You're not making my job easier. Bruge may still change his mind. As long as she lives in the manor of our beloved minister... Think a little before you open your mouth, okay?"

"She started it herself, she was curious. I was just responding."

"Kristoff!"

"I know, I know I'm a boor and an idiot. But you should have interrupted me too. Do you think she was offended?"

"We'll see in a week when Bruge announces the tariffs."

After munching on the second tulip, Alithea began to dwell on other specimens from the circus menagerie, winged snakes and ice toads. Louisa said loudly that she also had to pay a visit there, everyone would go after the performance. Alithea mechanically offered her a flower, drawing the strange woman into a form of confidentiality with one gesture.

"...or those fire diggers" she continued breathlessly "or is it something that grew out of a stone, a plant or an animal, where do they get it from, do they morph it themselves? Where do they get such crazy breeders?

"This can't be healthy for anyone. You should see, Esthle" Ihmet muttered "what we sometimes fish out of the sea. Lately it's even hard to say where it comes from, maybe the South Herdon? Okeanik currents carry them through tens of thousands of stadia, mainly debris, rarely living ones. In the past, we knew all species, places and times of occurrence, I have a hand-written atlas from the last century, in which even individual specimens of krakens and sea snakes are named: 'Toothless Buba, in the twenty-second year crushed the Succubus IV, a fragment of the mast stuck under the left fin, do not throw waste into the water', and the like, truly charming. Now? You can't be sure of anything, everything changes."

Mr. Berbelek suppressed a smile, noticing the undisguised fascination with which Alithea and Abel were listening to The nimrod's melancholic talk. After all, Bresla is a musty province of Europe, has a circus like Aberrato K'Ire's ever visited there? They certainly felt strongly about Maria's abandonment and sudden departure - but they are also undoubtedly experiencing the greatest adventure of their lives.

This fascination is easy to exploit, but it is also a powerful force in itself. Blessed naivety, radiant curiosity — was Abel right after all? Who will I become bit by bit when I am no longer soaking up their Form...?

For the second time a smile reached his face, and this time Mr. Berbelek did not suppress it.

"But not only in the seas" said Esthle Amitace, continuing her rhythmic fanning, the brilliant blue shimmering over her breasts like the single wing of a bird of paradise. "I just got a letter from a friend in Alexandria. People returning from the second circle, from beyond the Golden Kingdoms, have been bringing strange news for some time now about entire jungles deformed beyond recogni-

tion, about depleted herds of elephants, gazelles, tapalopes, dying in thousands somewhere during their migrations across the savannahs. Sometimes a caravan brings a corpse - but a living specimen cannot be brought to Alexandria, they stay away from Nebuchadnezzar's crown. Only in the south, beyond the border of his Form, between the weak anthos of wild Kratistoi — that's where it comes from. From the heart of the jungle. Hypatia sends scouts, entire expeditions with royal sophistae. The aristocracy even organizes such hunts, a new fashion for several seasons... I read that this year even merchants are joining in and financing their own expeditions. I'll probably stay there for a few months and then go to Iberia." Here she looked at Berbelek. "Either way, we must leave Vodenburg before the summer comes and the city becomes truly unbearable."

"Are you hunting, esthle?" The nimrod asked.

"First out of social obligation, now for pleasure" she laughed. "Only for noble game. But ultimately isn't it the hunter himself who ennobles every game, showing it his respect in the ritual of pursuit and combat?

"Ligaion, *The First River*" Abel recognized the quote and boasted about his knowledge.

"I've wanted to visit Alexandria for a long time..." Paul began hesitantly. "Truly, how many poets have praised Nebuchadnezzar's kalokagatia? 'The Sacred Gardens of Parethene, who saw them at night, under the bright eye of the Cyclops of Pharos...'"

"Oh, you're invited, please come!" Shulima flapped her fan hastily.

"I'll need you here," Kristoff Njute snapped. "Maybe next year."

"Maybe" The Ryter's son-in-law shrugged.

"But really!" Esthle Amitace exclaimed. "I would be very pleased! Or if you would like..." she nodded to Alithea. "I must confess that I would prefer not to have most of the people I have met here as traveling companions; their company during official dinners is completely enough for me. There's something about this city... Here's to the sun of Alexandria! The more I think about it, the more determined I become."

Alithea and Abel exchanged glances, then simultaneously looked at Hieronem.

Mr. Berbelek was no longer smiling. You cannot submit to a Form thoughtlessly, but that's not the point though, because this isn't really about returning to my childhood.

But before he could open his mouth—.

"It's starting!" Louisa pointed to the arena.

The actors had just left the stage a moment ago. The boom of invisible drums rang out, and to the rhythm of this drum he stepped onto the boards, K'Ire, flanked by two red-eyed sphinxes. The sphinxes roared, the drums fell silent, K'Ire raised his hand holding a golden skeptron -and that's it: he didn't have to raise his voice, he didn't even have to say anything, his mere presence, pose, gesture was enough. The conversations immediately stopped and the audience froze, looking expectantly at the tall Goth. sWithout a word he conquered their attention; but they had wanted to be defeated, they had paid for it.

"Could I have a word with you?" whispered the Persian, leaning towards Hieronim.

"Now? What happened?"

"I think one of the Second Grenadian nimrods is here. I know him, I don't think he has a permanent contract, he would be tempted."

"Hmm, Alright."

They apologized to those seated, and hurried to the side barrier of the auditorium.

"Which one?" Mr. Berbelek asked, looking around at the rows of faces staring at the scene. K'Ire announced the first performance, the show was starting.

"I lied" said Ihmet. "I didn't see anyone. How long have you known this woman?"

"What? Who?"

"Her. Esthle Amitace, right?"

"What do you mean?"

"Tell me first. How long?"

"She came to Vodenburg from Byzantion this winter. To my uncle. The minister's seldom-seen niece. We were introduced to each other at some party at the prince's, in Decembris or Novembris."

The Persian grimaced and tugged at his mustache. He reached into his pocket, took out an amber cigarette, and gave it to Berbelek. Hieronim, yielding to Zajdar's form, took the tobacco in silence. They lit it.

The nimrod leaned his shoulder against the wooden barrier. Without turning his body, he looked back, over his shoulder, towards the front row - Mr. Berbelek followed his gaze. They saw only the top of Shulima's back and the back of her head, the light crown of hair, like a pre-image of her invisible crown, the openwork anthos. She watched the performances of the cacomorphic demiurgoi with the others, staring at the arena, not aware of the men's eyes.

"In one thousand one hundred and sixty-six" Zajdar began slowly, stopping every time the crowd uttered screams of terror or loud sighs "I stopped working in the protection of caravans on the Incense Trail and accepted my first orders for the Mediterranean routes. I sailed mainly on Kafton galleys, Aegypt, Rome, Knossos, Grenada, the Black Sea. The Storm King was moving through the sky again, it was the end of a peaceful sailing in the Mediterranean. Then, as you probably remember, the Warlock left the Uralic strongholds for the third time and set off south, and the Khan had to escape through the Bosphorus. Byzantion was preparing for war, so he brought in strategos, areses, even nimrods, the Sultan hired The Horror. I sailed there and in Crimea. In the summer, the Warlock came to Crimea. The Prince of Chersonesus paid him homage. It took place publicly, above the harbor, on the terraces of the citadel; all the trees were cut down and the wall was torn down to make sure nothing blocked the view. You must have seen paintings and engravings. I was there. Crowds as far as the eye can see. After all, how often does a mortal have the opportunity to look into the face of a kratistos?"

Mr. Berbelek did not comment. Ihmet Zajdar paused to exhale a round puff of smoke.

"Everyone was kneeling. Even when we managed to stand up, it was hard to straighten our backs, every single one of us were slaves that day. Heat. Dozens of women gave birth prematurely, I'm sure you've heard of these 'Warlock's

babies'. It lasted from dawn to dusk. The images only show the moment of Hesara's homage; it took place in the morning. But then there were endless processions, speeches, blessings and executions. The Warlock sat on a great throne made from the jaws of a sea serpent, which exactly matches the images. He also had his entourage: a seneschal, ares guard, two Southern governors, and of course Ivan Karel. On the right, still in the shade of the canopy, sat a woman in a sumptuous cafton dress. He leaned towards her several times, they talked, he laughed, I saw. Golden hair, Alexandrian breasts, swallow eyebrows, straight-backed. She disappeared sometime in the afternoon. I only knew that she did not belong to the Chersonesian aristocracy.“

Mr. Berbelek took his eyes off the silhouette of Amitace, half-obscured by closer viewers.

"How far away were you standing? One hundred, two hundred pous?"

"I am a nimrod, esthlos. I see, I remember, I recognize. In the forest, at the sea, in the crowd - a split second, a face, an animal in the bush. I will never forget.

"So what exactly do you want to tell me?"

"I guess it should be obvious." The Persian threw and stamped on the tobacco. "The Warlock's Rat."

Rats, flies, dogs, they are known variously, these are the closest associates of a kratistos, their informers and followers, living directly in the fire of the kratistos' crown, days, months, years, the keros is unable to withstand the pressure of such a powerful Form, it gives in, sooner or later, immediately or in stages, but gives in: first, of course, behavior, speech, but soon also feelings, the deepest ones, and the body, down to the bones — morphs towards the kratistos' ideal, changing into their image and likeness, their eidolons of Power. If the kratistos himself does not consciously stop the process, all the servants and court officials would soon be killed — they have his face. Rats — eating at his table, sleeping under his roof, sharing his joys and worries —they show a similarity that goes much further.

He doesn't even have to give orders, issue commands or prohibitions; they know, the thoughts in their minds run on parallel tracks, their morph is symmetrical like a butterfly's wings, an image in a mirror, a returning echo, pride

and humiliation.

However, such emissaries, spies and agents whom everyone recognizes at first glance are of no use. Therefore, the kratistoi hire body teknitoi — or they develop an appropriate morph for them, so long as it does not contradict their anthos — and give their rats a safe, original appearance. Longevity is just a side effect. Because if Zajdar saw her as a mature woman in 1166, it means that Shulima is at least fifty years old. Yet she looks twenty. How long has she been "Esthle Shulima Amitace" — a year, half a year?

Of course, whether Ihmet is telling the truth, making things up, lying, or only slightly distorting the truth — this cannot be verified.

"It could have been her mother" Mr. Berbelek muttered. "Or someone else entirely: maybe she simply took over the beautiful Form of a foreign aristocrat."

"If she took over so perfectly... then she is, isn't she?"

In the arena, a naked man clapped his hands and immediately burst into flames, the audience screamed in unison.

Mr. Berbelek smoked his tobacco in silence.

"I don't feel the Warlock in her."

"A Good rat, a lovely rat."

"I invited her to stay with me for the summer."

"He always finishes off defeated enemies."

"But she says she will go to Alexandria first, under Nebuchadnezzar's morph, and he hates the Warlock..."

"So there is where you're going to kill her" the nimrod, a teknites of feral hunts, told him firmly, and Mr. Berbelek did not deny it.

E.
A Word, A Gesture, A Look

MARIA forbade them, but they wrote letters to their friends left in Bresla anyway.

Alithea:

I think he's afraid of us. But what a city this is! My room is small, the sun doesn't shine. It's cold in here. But you should see what is happening on the streets! I don't know who these people are, or where they come from. But they arrive. The port is great. That sea! Yesterday I went to the walls and stood there for an hour and watched. Waves! Does the sea have its own morph? I thought I would fall asleep. We were at the circus!!! You've never heard of such creatures in your life. What were they doing! Dad knows all kinds of important people, the prince, ministers and this foreign Esthle, how beautiful she is! Maybe he wants to get married again. But I won't ask him. Sometimes he looks at me like he really does. I think I'm afraid of him.

Abel:

He's rich, I didn't know he was that rich. He told me a little about the company. I know what you're thinking, but I have no idea what his plans are, he has other relatives, he's in good health, and he didn't mention anything about a will. He's not an effusive person. So don't expect to get any new loans out of me now (I know you!).

Of course, not a word about his first wife. I have no idea which of these terrible family legends are true. He doesn't seem that cruel. (When you finally go to Ostrog, you can tell me then). Anyway, he doesn't keep any dogs at home here.

We live strangely modestly. However, this may change soon. The season is ending, in the spring-summer the aristocracy leaves Vodenburg, we are to move to Iberia. But maybe he will be persuaded and we will go to Alexandria, on a hunt deep into Africa. Don't worry, I'll bring you a souvenir (just don't bite your tongue out of envy).

No matter what you say, Vodenburg is a large merchant city, half of Europe passes through it, you can meet everyone here. In my first week I met more aristocrats than in my entire life in Bresla. I've seen people of all shapes and sizes. (Oh yes, I checked: wild Herdonians REALLY have tails - how much do you owe me already?).

Several dozen stadia north of the city have become the camp of three hundred Horrors. I'll try to sneak out there for a long ride before we leave Vodenburg.

Mr. Berbelek read them, carefully removing the trail seals over the candle. Anton was to send Abel and Alithea's letters in the morning, along with Hieronim's mail. Mr. Berbelek noticed them lying on a tray in the front library on the ground floor. He stopped, picked them up, and turned them over in his fingers. Open or not open? As usual, he couldn't sleep, so he went down in the middle of the night to catch up on overdue correspondence. Walking into his study, he rested his eyes on ornamental calligraphy decorating a folded letter on top - it was Alithea who had addressed it in green ink. Open or not open? He knew he would open it.

He turned on the pyroki lamps in the study and drew the heavy curtains tighter — the ground floor of the building was low, the windows facing the street almost reached the ceiling, but they were small, and at night they were closed from the outside with iron shutters, which, however, always failed to provide tightness. He closed the door, lit hot incense and sat down at the desk.

There were seven letters — five Alithea, two Abel. He read them all. He found himself smiling and giggling as he read. He was so astonished by his own

behavior that he began to comment on it aloud: "Well, well, you're a silly man, Hieronim Berbelek" which again revealed itself to him as a disturbing sign of mental instability.

He warmed up the wax trail again and sealed the letters.

Mr. Berbelek also kept in touch with his relatives and friends from Vistul by letter; it is true that he would prefer not to receive some letters and forget about some people completely. Orlanda wrote monthly, long, gibbering epistles, signals of her growing madness. He just received it — a short one, but because it's short — as usual, it was a concise letter from his subordinate from the times of his great wars and great triumphs, Janna-z-Gniezno, the hegemon of the Vistulian army. Her biting wit always managed to put him in a good mood.

Well, the village didn't piss on your grave. So that at least it would be known whether we have concluded with such a peace or whether it is simply a frozen front. But no, Kazimir and Tokacz, this nonsense field marshal, only keep repeating to "hold positions" and "not to provoke further incidents". As a result, we have been standing on the Vistul line for the fourteenth year, watching Moscow colonize the eastern principalities, and the Warlock take root in this land, in these people. Yesterday, a rumor reached us about desertions from the garrison at the Lusatian fortress. Most of the Danube grain trade now passes through Lusatia. If a dumb soldier like me can read these movements of the anthos, it must be devastatingly obvious to Świątowid. Five, ten years — what do you think? Fortunately, I probably won't live to see it.

But what about you? Have you caught any Frankish princess? I tell people you live like a king there. Thanks for the fur. I convince them that it's from some Nordlin lover, but I don't think anyone is naive enough to believe it. I looked in the mirror once when I was gouging out my eye after the Legnica Massacre. I don't think gray hair would make my face look more attractive.

In the left compartment of his secretary he kept a bunch of documents sent by Njute, and at the top there was a long epistle written on rice paper from their partner on the other side of the world, Yijo Ikita, with Kristoff's note attached to the fourth page: *You're going to damn Alexandria!*

The zaibatsu prince's letter was from a month and a half ago, that is, it reached Vodenburg then, as it was written a few weeks earlier. Kristoff thought it appropriate to show it to Hieronim now as another argument in the conflict that had been going on for several days. — since the meeting on the meadows — A campaign of persuasion between Njute and Berbelek. The Ryter urged him to travel to Alexandria — which Mr. Berbelek shied away from with perfunctory, non-committal answers.

"Do you have anything better to do?" Kristoff continued. "What? Some plans that I know nothing about, some new career, a new shape of life, anything?"

He had nothing.

Kristoff was keen on the idea because he was keen on everyone, but the need to visit Alexandria had come up in their conversations more than once. Heironim reminded them how eager Paul was to leave — but they both knew that the Ryter's young son-in-law was out of the question, and Njute dismissed the idea with a quick wave of his hand. He argued again.

"Firstly: sooner or later we have to come to an agreement with the African Union and sign contracts." (The African Company was headquartered in Alexandria.) "Secondly: If we managed to get rid of the intermediaries in the supply of southern spices, we would start making real money on return cargo. Thirdly: Hypatia orders it. Fourthly: I'm not saying you should marry her right away, but, you know, hot nights in the Golden Aura with the niece of the Minister of Trade... is a great asset. Fifth: read what Yijo has written for yourself. We have to keep our finger on the pulse. What is it anyway, three, four months? Kriste, I'll pay for everything out of my own pocket!"

Ikita-san wrote in classical Greek, which under his pen did not come alive with great feeling and emphasis. Mr. Berbelek had never met him. However, Yijo's meeting with Kristoff took place beyond the Western Okeanus more than twenty years ago.

He then set out from the Nipponese colonies in western Herdon— sponsored in part by Emperor Aiko himself —in an expedition to explore the geography and kerography of the Throat of Eusumene, that narrowest land connection between the North and South of Herdon. There was a plan to create an inter-okeanosal canal there, modeled on the Alexander Canal, connecting the Mediterranean

Sea with the Erythraean Sea; Mr. Berbelek remembered that all European newspapers wrote about this "throat cutting". Young Yijo Ikita also took part in the expedition on behalf of one of the interested parties in the zaibatsu investment.

The venture failed, as the expedition entered directly into the mad Form of one of the native kratistos, fleeing south under the pressure of the Anaxegiros anthos, which was unfolding like a cold, iron flower. They had to get back to the lands of smooth keros as quickly as possible, before they forgot themselves for good. The closest they had was to Herdon-Aragon. The sickest were taken on board by a ship commanded by Kristoff Njute's father. Kristoff was the second officer there. He tended to Yijo, who was suffering from a blood infection and bone deformity. Then they became friends, their morphs mixed. When Kristoff founded the Njute Merchant House a few years later, Ikita financed the venture without hesitation; and he didn't lose any of it. As an active accomplice, he continued to share confidential information with Kristoff obtained by the countless spies of the Ikita zaibatsu, the eighth power of the Divine Empire.

"There is a cheap torment, after after its passage a man ceases to be a man", that's what they say, these are the stories we've been told over and over again. Rumors of the emergence of new kratistoi circulate every spring, as if they were hatching from the swirls of keros with nature's annual rebirth. We ignored them, like hundreds of them before. Then, however, information began to arrive about the growing interest in these lands from various European and Asian powers, envoys of kings and kratistoi went there for unclear purposes, they returned, they did not return, the next ones went there. At this point it is not even important what the real source and cause of these rumors are; now the competition's interest alone is worth investigating. In this way, life is born from the accidental confluence of desires, something comes from nothing.

A random confluence of desires. Mr. Berbelek considered the paths of fate. After folding Ikita's letter, he lit a cigarette, a smoke would help. Path one: I'll go to Alexandria. Is Shulima really the Warlock's rat? There, in Nebuchadnezzar's anthos, I will at least have a better chance. What if it isn't? So much the better. Path two: I won't go to Alexandria. Is Shulima really the Warlock's rat? Therefore, as long as it is far from me, I will not push myself before her eyes, the wide road; Then I will leave Vodenburg myself, I will not

go to Iberia, I will hide somewhere else. What if it isn't? What is my desire leading me to?

Let me look at myself through the eyes of Abel: what would Hieronim Berbelek do in my place? Would he run away? Would he hide and pray, trembling for the danger to go away? Or would the real Hieronim Berbelek stand against him with his head held high?

It's about time I started pretending to be him.

He moved the ashtray. Tucked behind him, in the corner of the secretary desk, was an invitation to dinner with the prince, written on official court parchment. I'm sure Esthle Amitace will be there. He checked date - Today. Mr. Berbelek will go.

At the same moment that he fell in love, Abel Latek hated the object of his affection heartily.

Her name was Rumia, she was the granddaughter of the Prince of Neurgia. He saw her and blushed. He saw her and realized that he was not worthy to raise his eyes to her. He was born and will die her slave. He kneels because he couldn't not kneel.

Dinner was served in the Forefathers' Hall.

Here, in the Vodenburg palace, where Gregory the Grim lived for centuries, his Form resonated most deeply and was the most difficult to oppose. Nobody smiled. Conversations were already quieting in the outer hall. Alithea murmured uncertainly a few more times, then she too just looked around dejectedly. The pyroki installation pierced the palace with a dense network of metal veins, and constellations of bright lights surrounded them on all sides. — and yet the prevailing feeling was darkness, damp gloom, slimy blackness, flowing down the stairs, the walls, the wainscoting, the ancient stone, the carpets, the rugs, the tapestries, the silver and the gold. The flames did not shiver with heat, they trembled with cold; chills ran down the guests' skin. In the Hall of Protocol, a great fire roared in a high fireplace, but its glow did not reach beyond a few steps from the hearth, or so it seemed to Abel. Their father warned them and they dressed warmly. The rule was restrained elegance, Herdonian

simplicity. A dinner was given in honor of the newly installed ambassador of Cologne. Mr. Berbelek regularly received invitations to similar parties because he was the only resident of Vodenburg — apart from its rulers and a few masters from the local academy — which the princely guests had a chance to hear about earlier; in addition, he belonged to the aristocracy and did not cause trouble, rarely expressing his own opinion and generally agreeing with the higher-born interlocutors. It was wonderfully predictable, a protocol master's dream: a man wholly defined by other's Forms. He immediately sensed any disturbances in court etiquette. The door was just starting to open — he was already turning towards them, his knees were bending, his head was bowing. It wasn't even about him kneeling first — but that he knelt exactly when he needed to kneel. Abel was late, he was still standing when they entered: a prince, a duchess, two daughters, a grandson and a granddaughter. He caught her eye for a moment. Rumia, he knew her name was Rumia. She smiled at him from the corner of her mouth, neither questioning nor encouraging. He fell to his knees. His clenched fists pressed against the cold floor, blood pounded in his ears. What a humiliation!

Dinner was served in the Forefathers' Hall, under the watchful eyes of the prince's ancestors, who looked at those eating from the ceiling, with a gala of portraits drawn by the greatest demiurgoi of brush and canvas. Abel glanced at the pictures suspiciously. These richly dressed men and women, with beautiful, stern faces, seemed to be leaning out of their frames, turning their eyes towards him. He counted the portraits: seventy-two. How far back does the history of the Neurgia family go? How many generations of aristocrats stand in the shadow behind the pale-faced Rumia?

It was enough to listen to the ambassador of Cologne, Esthlos Karol Reuck, pontificating over turkey in mushroom sauce:

"They have become so savage that, hmmmm, they have even lost any sense of hierarchy, there are no social structures, only, hmmm, one big horde in which everyone's vote is worth the same and everyone decides together, one, one and one, an amorphous mass. Neither kings nor slaves, there is no bottom, there is no top; mhmmm, they forgot everything.“

"Did they forget?" Abel said from the other end of the table, and immediately regretted opening his mouth, because even though it made Rumia look at him, everyone else looked at him too, and suddenly he had to fight with all

his strength to say even a single word under the weight of their Vodenburg-cold gaze. word more. "Have they forgotten, or was this Form never given to them? Maybe Anaxegiros really is there first."

"You, mhmmm, young man, have you never heard of the "wild kratistoi" in Herdon, but also in Africa, in Gaudat's Land in the Antipodes? Order is in the nature of the world. This, mhmmm, chaos and confusion into an even, uniform mass is contrary to it and in fact sick. Only in the deepest wilderness, beyond the Megoros, in the forests of the night, under the hellish trees, under, mhmmm, delicious, delicious, only there can a person degenerate to such an extent."

"If he forgets his Form completely" said the duchess "then he ceases to be human, right, Iaxa?"

Before she answered, Iaxa, the court sophistes, wiped her thin lips with a handkerchief and arranged the cutlery symmetrically on both sides of the plate.

"This order is universal" she said, looking at Abel "and it applies to humans as well as to animals and plants; everything that lives and wants to live. Take any two dogs as an example. Under any circumstances they meet, they will start barking and fighting until each one submits to the other, recognizing his superiority and his subordination. Did humans arise from animals at once as kings and kratistoi, servants and slaves? No. But every time two strangers meet, there is a clash of wills, an attempt at submission, in a more or less subtle form. Now that we live in civilization, this is not always visible at first glance. In the beginning, however, in the wild, the struggles were brutal and unrestricted. Humble yourself or die! How much are you willing to risk for your freedom, the independence of your Form? Because in the end, you always have to play for the highest stakes. Do you prefer death or life under someone else's will? Some gave in, valuing a peaceful, safe life more highly, and from these came slaves, peasants, and obedient people; but others, there are fewer of them, they cannot bear any humiliation, they will break rather than bend, their Form is too hard — and from them comes the aristocracy."

"I know, I know, but..." Abel stammered.

"But." Esthle Amitace smacked her lips. "But we of high blood can admit our true fears among ourselves. Esthlos Latek is right to question Esthlos Reuck's thesis. Since these ancient Herdonians once lived in healthy structures, since they had civilization, and now they can't even name the leader of their

horde... Our future is not certain either. No Form is given once and for all. Those who are born at the top and do not have to fight for their place here find it most difficult to risk everything when someone rises up who will not bend his neck and challenge them; and he will have nothing to lose, and they will — all the riches of the world. It's easier, safer, simpler to give him some of these riches. And the next one. And the next one. Remember the fate of Alexander's family."

"Which is a warning to us all" muttered the prince, giving Rumia a sharp look; Abel noticed them and suppressed a smile as he leaned over his plate.

"Mhmmm, so that's, mhmmm, what happened to them, mhmmm, savageness, savageness."

"Ah, my dear ambassador" Esthle Amitace reached across the table and touched his forearm with her fingers "we know it's true. Even more so, it should be publicly denied. Why encourage ambitious dreamers? As Esthlos Latek says: 'this Form was never given to them.'"

"Truly, the mind of Odysseus," said the prince, raising his glass in a toast to Shulima.

After dinner, when everyone had dispersed to the corners of the great hall to conduct whispered conversations in the shadows (the prince and the ambassador were the first to say goodbye), Alithea quickly disappeared somewhere with Iaxa, and father left shortly thereafter, taking Esthle Amitace by the arm. — and Abel was left alone. He didn't know what to do with himself. Butlers and guards in black and red steel uniforms stood, statuesquely motionless, against the walls and by the doors, seemingly not looking at anyone, but he also felt their eyes on him, as unfriendly as those immortalized in the portraits of Rumia's ancestors. Moving farther away from them, he finally stopped at the windows overlooking the front courtyard of the palace. Darkness enveloped the city, darkness thickly encrusted with the lights of thousands of windows and lanterns. Once upon a time, the prince's palace stood far beyond the borders of the outskirts of Vodenburg, but over the centuries the city also crept up to the Neurgian Hills and surrounded the prince's plot on all sides: the palace itself, a labyrinth of farm buildings, stables and carriage houses, and the famous Gardens. He couldn't see them from here, he couldn't see them as they pulled up to the main entrance. Did Gregory the Grim's anthos, as heavy as a tombstone, really morph the earth, steel, plants and animals into one large, half-living, half-dead

architectural monster? He pressed his cheek against the window, but his view was blocked by the west wing of the palace.

Only when he caught her scent and breath did he notice her presence. He jumped back. She watched him, her head tilted, her arms folded under her breasts, completely hidden under the laced corset of her dark navy blue dress. Her hair, the sign of Neurg, as fiery red as her brother's, mother's, aunt's, grandmother's, and grandfather's, surrounded her face in a fiery aura, and he could almost see the waves of keros deformation spreading from her. She's a spoiled girl, he thought, she can't be much older than me, by Jupiter, I'm of noble blood, why should I, no, I won't bow, I won't bow my head, I won't fool around. A smile, ambiguous words, a clear look — this is the way.

She slowly reached out her hand to him.

He fell to his knees. Without looking, he reached out with a trembling hand and, with his eyes closed, kissed the manicured fingers. His heart was beating too fast to count, he couldn't count to three, he was red, sweating, breathing through his mouth.

Rumia took half a step closer. She crushed him into the floor. The scent of floral perfumes closed his nostrils. He's about to lose consciousness. He almost sobbed with despair. He wanted to break her neck, he wanted to suck the breath from between her lips, the brightness from her eyes, oh, to look into them, maybe for eternity in those eyes.

Did she say anything? He couldn't hear his own breathing over the wheeze.

He shuddered as she placed her hand on his head. She stroked his hair. She leaned over him, and he felt it, even though he wasn't looking.

"Get up."

He had to get up, he will, he won't make a fool of herself in front of her, she wants him to get up.

He stood up.

"Do you now know what the world order is?"

He nodded.

She suddenly giggled and punched him in the arm; he almost physically felt the change in Form — he exhaled, took a step back, and lifted his eyelids.

She smiled mischievously, a spoiled girl, no older than him.

"Do you want to see the Gardens?"

He grinned slyly in response.

Mr. Berbelek saw them leaving through the side door, his son and the prince's granddaughter, and he pointed to Shulima. She nodded.

"Like moths to a flame."

They were talking about politics, he tried to direct the dialogue towards John Blackbeard's alliance with The Seven-Fingers, the Warlock was bound to surface in it sooner or later. Once this happened, she briefly surprised him with the undisguised venom in her words; but he immediately put a cold thought to this impression: this is how she should be camouflaged.

"Son of a goat" she cursed "Spawn of Sheol! Think what Europe might look like if it weren't for that stinking ulcer. I can't understand why they won't unite against him, why they won't finally exile him! But no, always just these games, one-day meetings, paper, paper and paper, of course neither of them will meet face to face, shake hands, taste the sincerity of the other. Kratistoi — it's understandable, they can never meet; but kings, high aristocrats, rulers of Matter? They have the strength, they could do it. But no, they imitate, idiots, kratistoi, everything as usual: through intermediaries and intermediaries of intermediaries –and then everyone wonders why the Warlock is victorious again, he has caught the next one in his net."

King Kratistos Seven Fingers, ruler of Babylon and the surrounding lands, was perhaps the only truly sincere ally of the Warlock. — unlike the countless hosts of those who paid homage to the Warlock because they could not help but do so. Seven-Fingers stood by him during the Kratistos Wars, and joined Forms with him during the exile of the Kratista Illeia. Sevenfingers' alliance with John Blackbeard meant tightening the political vice between Asia Minor and Macedonia, in fact it cuts off the independent countries of western Europe from any direct support from the east for good.

"Face to face..." Mr. Berbelek muttered. "Then they would succumb to it

even faster."

"Oh, I'm sorry I opened that wound, Esthlos" she said, squeezing his arm, and if it weren't for her grip he would have been sure she was just mocking him; and he just frowned, confused. She put her glass down on the tray provided by the butler and took Hieronim's arm again. "Please forgive me if... Of course, I knew exactly who you were when I first saw you, back then at that party at Lóke's; you didn't see me, Esthlos. You got drunk in the corner all evening, although half-heartedly, you came out sober. A sad end for heroes, I thought. Someone you read about in historical works is better not to meet in person - it will always be a disappointment. But now I know better. You have never been broken, Esthlos, you cannot be broken. You only retreated behind the fortress walls and surrendered the outer ramparts." She squeezed him again. "I'd like to see you raise your banners again."

They had already gone out onto the western terrace. Grim-faced guards stood along the stone balustrade, holding white lanterns in their raised hands.

Mr. Berbelek tried to watch Shulima out of the corner of his eye, without turning his face towards her; the shadows from the lanterns deceived him — what does her half-smile mean? Irony, pity, contempt? Once after such broken lyric from the mouth of a woman he would think: she wants to be seduced, she's asking for it. Now he only recalled those old associations.

But of course this was her Form: an evening court flirt. Maybe the idea of reviving an old hero really played on Esthle Amitace's ambition, what greater satisfaction for a woman than awakening the man in a man, so maybe she really —

He shivered.

"I have friends in Byzantion" he said dryly. "We managed to exchange letters about you, Esthle."

She didn't loosen her grip. She turned slightly, looking out at the night skyline of Vodenburg and the sea. He didn't take his eyes off Shulima's face. The smile disappeared, but that was all; she didn't betray herself. Did he make a mistake by bluffing? The moment was right.

He waited for her to say something, this or that, make a counter accusation,

laugh, cry, brazenly deny it, whatever. But no, nothing. He slowly freed his arm and moved away. He took out a cigarette. A butler lit it. Mr. Berbelek inhaled the smoke. Shulima stood staring at Vodenburg, tapping her white fingernails on the rough stone of the balustrade.

When she finally moved, he was taken by surprise. Before he focused his gaze, she was standing right in front of him, eye to eye, breath to breath — she was leaning over Hieronim through the smoke.

"Will you come with me to Alexandria?" she asked quietly.

He didn't look away; maybe that was the mistake. ("So that's where you're gonna kill her.")

"Yes" he replied.

She kissed him quickly on the cheek.

"Thank you."

She walked away, her heels clicking vigorously.

He slowly finished his tobacco.

Alithea had already fallen asleep in the carriage. Porte carried her to her bed. However, there was still too much cooking in Abel.

Even when Mr. Berbelek finally forced him to sit in one of the armchairs in the library, the young man still stretched, snapped his fingers, crossed his legs, sometimes the other way around, sometimes threw them over the arm of the chair, whistled under his breath, and during breaks he banged fist in the thigh — probably without realizing it. Hieronim was amused by this for a long time until he thought about the source of this amusement and remembered the secretly opened letters. Looking away, he swallowed bitter saliva.

Teresa brought a black thea, he thanked her and handed his son a hot goblet.

"You are aware that they have hundreds of such toys" he muttered, not looking at Abel.

"Who?"

"Them. Court sirens."

"Like Esthle Amitace?" Abel retorted.

"Yes" replied Mr. Berbelek calmly, sitting diagonally in the armchair.

They've talked like this here once before. By repeating the place, time and gestures they returned to that Form, night merged with night, the spoken with the unsaid. Has anything changed between them in the meantime? Well, Abel no longer addressed him in the third person.

"Yes, Esthle Amitace, Esthle Neurg, them" said Mr. Berbelek, slurping the salty liquid. "Why do the aristocracy marry among themselves? Since no equality of feelings is possible between a dog and its owner: the dog is owned, the owner owns. Of course, he can also train the animal to love him sincerely."

Abel turned red. He played with the goblet for a long time, without looking up.

"I know" he finally muttered. "But I am also of noble blood."

"That's why she wanted to play with you in the first place. Any slave would not give her satisfaction. I guess you gave in too easily, she won't be interested in you again. You never had sex with the high aristocracy in Bresla?"

"No." He put down the goblet and looked at his father. "But you have great experience, you lived among them, you were one of them, right?"

Mr. Berbelek nodded, ignoring Abel's cocky tone.

"After a while, you stop believing in other people's truthfulness. If they behave like involuntary objects in your presence, they are objects. You don't talk to objects, you don't have feelings for objects, you just collect them. You seek the company of others like you; you welcome anyone who can oppose you on the slightest issue. In these short moments you are not alone. Rumia - she still has hope, forgive her."

"Is that why he spared you?" Because you objected?"

"Who? Oh, him."

"Is this why?"

Mr. Berbelek glanced at the clock. It was almost two o'clock. When Teresa left, she slammed the library door and locked it outside at night. Everyone is asleep, darkness covers the metropolis, here only the wavering flames of pyroki fires under frosted lampshades protect us from it, this is an opportune moment. Mr. Berbelek — a goblet with half-drunk thea in his left hand, his right hand on his heart — he leans towards his son and starts talking.

ϵ

Like a Warlock

THE flints stopped sparking, the matches stopped lighting, the keraunets and pyresiders could no longer be fired. This is how we knew that the Warlock had arrived.

The first suicides among soldiers occurred the next evening. It was the second month of the siege and I had nearly seven hundred people under my command, not counting the six thousand inhabitants of Kolenica who remained at home. No one kept count of townspeople's suicides.

At that time I was walking around in the morph of a great strategos, troops swore loyalty at the mere sight of me, battles were won, I barely looked at the field, orders were obeyed before I could even say them, I felt the keros giving way under my feet, I was over seven pous tall, there was no bed big enough in Kolenica, I was twenty-four years old and I had never lost a battle before, armies, castles, cities, lands, everything before me, there was no dream big enough. Then the Warlock arrived.

You need to know why I was stuck in Kolenica in the first place. The commander-in-chief of the Vistulian army, Marshal Sławski, ordered a counteroffensive along the Carpathian foothills on the orders of Casimir III, while the Goths were to advance from the north and push the Warlock's forces back to the Moscow line. On the maps it looked like a classic horseshoe: the enemy will either retreat on its own, or will have to fight on two fronts, with an equally tragic defeat on each front, or risk striking a seemingly exposed center,

certainly a trap that will soon turn into a deadly cauldron. However, to carry out this south-eastern counteroffensive, Sławski needed a large army, composed of veterans, and he gathered them, reducing the units occupying the interior of this horseshoe by two or three times. In Martius I had three thousand people, by Aprilis I had less than a thousand left. Slavsky had reasoned correctly: even with such a weakening of the defenders, the Warlock's strategos would have to be insane to attack the central strongholds of Vistul. The assumption was that they would go back. As you know, they didn't back down. We made it through Aprilis without any major problems.

Every day I went to the top of the Kolenica minaret, from there I had a perfect view of the podgrodzie and the outskirts, all the way to the forest. For a few weeks, I sent out regular horse reconnaissance, I set up posts in the nearby villages in the Vistul basin along the line of three hundred stadia, and we maintained constant communication with Cracovia. In fact, I was responsible for a nearly thousand-stadia front line, from Brotta to Cierebuż, and most of Mazovia's garrisons were under my control. In theory, that is, according to Slavsky's strategy, I should have received daily reports from them and the headquarters on the movements of Moscow's troops and at the first sign of retreat, I should have moved the entire central front behind them; So I was the commander-in-chief of the West Army and such a defeat was recorded in my books. However, from the beginning, reports came rarely and with delay, if at all, and I had to close my own posts and lookouts when the enemy raised larger forces, they burned three villages in one night, this was the limit of a reasonable risk. The scouts also came back more and more ragged. From the interrogations of captured individuals, I learned, that Trespiej Słoneczko, grandson of Ivan Karl, was approaching us with a Uralic horde of about ten thousand people. Of course, I immediately sent an agent to Cracovia, because this was information indicating that they had decided on a frontal attack strategy; I expected immediate reinforcements. Reinforcements did not come, we were cut off, Trepiej went deep and all the bridges and fords in front of and behind us were occupied. We had to rely on pigeons. But it was already a gamble. The Muscovites brought with them cleverly modified hawks, nine out of ten messenger birds were attacked by them in the sky above Kolenica, we saw them torn to shreds. Either way, Slavsky ordered us to "hold the town at all costs price", Kolenica was a key point, the invader could not leave it behind his back or bypass it — that's why it was entrusted to Hieronim Berbelek.

We were well prepared for the siege. I had previously called in demiurgosI

to repair the city walls, gather supplies, and deepen the wells. There was also a semi-wild teknitoi soma who had been living in Kolenica for years, until Martius no one even got sick. Then an exchange of fire began, the pyresiders thundered day and night, casualties were inevitable. However, I am sure that Trepiej suffered much more, I had good soldiers, good ares, skilled cannonists, we always reached further, shot more accurately, destroyed the pyresiders and the Muscovites' powder magazines. Once they tried an open assault, we repulsed them with virtually no losses. Morale was good, morale has always been good in my army. I led two night raids, we burned part of their camp. It was only a matter of time before Slavsky approached us, either with reinforcements or closing the encirclement from the south. It's true that they had the weather forecast with them, not a drop of rain had fallen for weeks, everything was dry. They were counting on a fire — but I trained the townspeople thoroughly, and the damage was minimal. We held on.

With the onset of Maius, reinforcements did indeed begin to arrive — meals for Trepiej. I watched from the minaret as they set up camp on the plain surrounding Kolenica, rows of identical, single-colored tents right on the horizon. Nothing good came from counting them, and it was the invisible lines hidden behind the horizon that were the most terrifying. These new ones brought with them behemoths and various Uralic cacomorphs, black spawn from the Warlock's breeding — a sure sign that Ivan Karel himself was approaching with his main forces. Ghouls, ukraks, witches, morphed from animals to humans or even more monstrous — from people to animals. They let them off their chains at dusk, they came up to the walls, they climbed up to the battlements, some of them could talk, they whispered in black tongues from the moonless darkness, the soldiers lost their nerve, they fired blindly, a waste of pyros. Ukraki were thrown over the walls by surprise with catapults, already dead. Trepiej wanted to spread all these plagues in the city, which they carry in their stomach bags, tense from the overcooked plague like drums. We already knew that it would be a long siege, since they wanted to take us by cacomorphia. Maybe they had crazed secret teknitoi among them who deliberately spread diseased anthos, crowns of decay's Form, over Kolenica; but I doubt that since it is always a great risk for the army to take someone like that with them, the mad are generally impossible to control, and their discipline is the first to rot. Or maybe it's just that our teknitoi soma kept us so tight in their aura. In any case, an epidemic did not break out.

I had plans to escape from the very beginning. Break through at an unex-

pected moment, a quick wedge — and I galloped west. But the problem was obviously the civilians, I wouldn't have been able to save them. However, my centurions raised purely military arguments: here, sitting in confinement, I'm just wasting the military's potential, while only the gods know what is happening in the wider world, whether Vistul is not falling under the bar of the Dwarf, Świacowid is under the Warlock's dream, who knows, I could possibly tip the scales.

In the fourth week of Maius, rumors began to circulate of the main forces defeat by Slavsky's forces , and that King Kasimir had escaped from Cracovia, and Świacowid was escaping to the western forests. You couldn't feel anything yet, but people believed so strongly that it was either true or false, and spirits began to decline. I gave several speeches; they helped for a short time.

With the beginning of Junius, I already felt that a change was coming. It was impossible to hide it from people, it was enough to throw a handful of sticks on the ground, half of them always fell in some geometric patterns, a square, an octagon, a pentagram, a star, you know the Warlock's seals. A handful of sticks, sand, muddy water, free smoke... He was approaching, public denials were of no use, he must have come down from the Urals at the beginning of spring, he had certainly already passed Moscow, he was heading west, straight towards us.

At least in his crown, I was not threatened by rebellions and hysteria of a terrified populace, discipline and obedience increased every day, the people of Kolenica soon fell on their faces in front of me, almost licking my boots. At first I was offended by this, but the Warlock's anthos got into me too, and after a week I had a quarrelsome merchant forgiven when he didn't throw himself on the ground in front of me. The sky was bright, cloudless, the hot blue of the Vistulian summer, but we all knew it was a vile lie of Matter.

Ivan Karl's camp swelled around the city like an ulcer around an open wound. At night, there were fires, music, and celebrations. They stopped shooting at us and that was the most disturbing thing. I was thinking about another trip, to at least catch up on the language, find out what their plans are, what's going on. The last pigeon reached us six weeks ago, we were cut off, the world beyond the view from the tower did not exist.

Then the flints stopped striking sparks, the matches stopped lighting, and the pyros stopped exploding. Guards on night vigils began to throw themselves

from the battlements, straight into the arms of the laughing ghouls and ukraks. The sun, it meant The Dwarf, had withdrawn his troops to the very edge of the forest, and now the siege was completely different. At dusk a herald stood at the gate. “Lay down your weapons and open the gates, and I will spare your lives. One way or another, one lives or dies falling at his feet,. He has arrived. He’s waiting. Open the gates. There is one order in the world, one ruler. This is his shadow. Open the gates. To Kolenica: The Kratistos Maksym Rog has arrived!” I ordered the crossbowmen to shoot this herald and to shoot all the others on sight, whatever colors they showed.

Maksym Rog, the Warlock, the Giant of Łjralski, the Eternal Widower, the Kratistos-Suzerain of Moscow, the black legend of Europe, the hero of hundreds of romantic dramas, the worm of history, the invincible terror with a thousand names — I saw him for the first time on the morning of the fourth of Quintilis. From the minaret, through the telescope. He rode alone in the middle of no man’s land between the trenches of Ivan Karł’s army and the walls of Kolenica, driving around the city. He was riding some kind of horned zoomorph with coal-black fur and a high, curved back, descended from camels or humiyas, and it took me a few minutes to realize the true proportions of the image: sitting on such a large beast, the man that lead it must be at least eight pous tall.

He looked more like a stocky, broad-shouldered strongman than a skinny man. It was hot, he was only wearing a white shirt and pants. I couldn’t see a face, only a mane of dark hair and black stubble. Once he turned his head towards me, I was sure he saw me, impossible, but I was sure, I almost dropped the telescope. You have to understand this: even then, it was enough for him to look at me. As I descended from the tower, I counted down the steps like the minutes remaining until my execution. I knew he would win. I knew we had no chance. The gates had to be opened. It was the Warlock.

The soldiers saw him too; that was what he meant, it was a pure fight to impose will, Form against Form. I gave another speech. “I will not allow fear to be spread, attempts to escape will be punishable by death. They won’t come in unless we let them in. Wait! Help is on the way!”

The Warlock walked around the city like a wolf around a fire, day after day, night after night, a lonely silhouette in an empty field, regular as a black star, a sundial of disaster. With each passing hour we sank deeper into his anthos. I don’t know if he already has a crown like that, or if he chose this particular

morph for us, at least it's what the Kolenica keros was heading towards, the target Form... We were attracted to nothingness, emptiness, stillness, lifelessness, silence and the perfect order of death. Have you ever had this feeling? — how unnatural, strange and terrifying it is that you live at all, that you breathe, move, speak, eat, excrete, what absurdities, what perversions, the abomination of a warm body, saliva, blood, bile, it circulates inside, turns in the soft organs, there is no right, nothing should, put your hand to your chest, what is it that is beating there, by the gods', you can't stand it, horror and disgust, tear it out, destroy it, keep it, return to it earth.

He chewed us up.

I went out into the empty streets, I was probably the only one with enough strength to climb the tower, go around the walls, check the posts, in fact there was nothing to check, those who were still there stayed not out of obligation or fear of me, but because it did not require any movement, decision, or impulse of will; they were almost dead. Often I couldn't tell the dead from the sleeping ones, they didn't eat or drink, they fell asleep in urine and shit. When I returned to my quarters one evening, I found my deputy and three centurions asleep in the briefing room; then I smelled their cups: they weren't sleeping, they drank almond poison in wine.

Quintilis turned into Sextilis, I had nothing to wear anymore, all my clothes turned out to be much too big, I rolled up my pant legs, tightened my belt, cut off the sleeves, I stole shoes from some corpse. Others had the same problem, had complained before; but most of them didn't care at all, they went naked, they hadn't put on armor for a long time. I tried to maintain discipline, at least among the officers. No threats worked. I got into the habit of taking walks at night, I couldn't sleep in this huge bed, I went there to see and listen to the mood and what the soldiers and the people of Kolenica were talking about. But then there was nothing to eavesdrop on, free conversation was as rare as laughter, Silence became the Form of Kolenica.

I couldn't understand why they weren't attacking, they would have breached the walls in the first assault, no one would have stood up to defend them. Didn't they know that, didn't the Warlock know? Instead, the days, weeks, months in his crown, the city and the people, did he kill us, no, did we kill ourselves, no, the similarity to death simply outweighed the similarity to life. Just trees, grass, animals — stunted, pale, dry, if alive, then moribund. Only a Kratistos

could maintain his Form in such an aura.

To be honest, I don't even remember that time very well, my memory has faded. Of course, it wasn't about giving up, don't believe the books. Then it wasn't about anything anymore. Probably if someone had picked them up and shouted to open the gates... But no one was capable anymore. I counted my heartbeats to convince myself that there was still some "I", some Hieronim Berbelek, anymore. Then I found out that in the last few days I was the only living person in Kolenica, at least the only one conscious — can you imagine how conscious I was, since I have no memories of those days. Only this: a ghostly huge sun in the bright blue sky.

And, of course, the last memory of when he entered the city. Now I think he was actually looking for me. He knew me, that is — they told him who was in charge. Because it - understand — this is the only victory of the kratistos: not through the destruction, exhaustion, flight of the enemy, but through voluntary tribute. To what extent can any of our actions in this world be called voluntary? This is their triumph. He entered alone, it is true to the legend, he always enters first and takes possession.

I'm not sure what I felt, that I stood up to meet him, or whether he found me on that street. Noon, heat, no shadows. I saw him emerging from around the corner, he was on foot, he had a hook in his left hand and he was tapping it rhythmically against his thigh. Step by step, slowly, it was a victor's walk, and every place he passed through, every house he passed, every thing he looked at — I really thought I saw that ripple of his morph flowing through the keros — every thing from then on was more like the Warlock. He found me on the ground and while he walked towards me, I tried to get to my feet. I hadn't eaten anything for a long time, eating was unthinkable, I would have liked to have stayed on all fours, I knew I should have stayed on all fours, on my knees, with my head in the dust, kissed his feet when he came near, it had to be done, it was natural, This is what everything was leading towards — try to understand, even though it's just words — when I raised my eyes, he covered half the sky, he is a giant, he has surpassed the human race, we do not reach his shoulder, his chest, he is beyond, we are below, earth, dust, dirt, on his knees, on his knees — try to understand — he didn't have to say anything, he stood over me, a hit on the thigh, a tuk-tuk, I was babbling something, I think I was moaning imploringly, saliva on my chin, my head was hanging, but I was still getting up, my leg, my arm, supporting myself and trembling, he was standing, waiting, I felt his scent,

something like the almonds from the mouths of people who commit suicide, or maybe the scent of his crown — try to understand, I don't understand it myself — I stood up, looked up, half-blind, looked into his eyes, blue pupils, tanned skin, he was smiling under his mustache, what was that smile supposed to mean, I still dream about it, the smile of a triumphant kratistos. Do you understand that? He would say the word and I would rip my heart out to please him.

I spat in his face.

II

Z.
Aereus

On April 22, 1194, Hieronim Berbelek left the princely town of Vodenburg on board the air pig *Al-Hawidzah*, going on a trip to Alexandria. He was accompanied by his son and daughter and two servants. They occupied the two double cabins Θ-I and K-Λ on the upper level. The *Al-Hawidzah* took ten more passengers. It had been chartered by the prince's glassworks for a direct flight to Alexandria, without any stopovers, and the aerostat's weather demiurgos announced that it would take three to seven days to travel the 20,000 stadia.

On the night of Aprilis 23-24, when they were flying over the Rhône Valley — the shadows of the high Alps loomed in the eastern sky, the yellow face of the Moon peeked out from between the clouds — one of the passengers was murdered. Only her broken scream was heard as she fell into the cold darkness, dozens of stadia towards the unseen ground.

The space that this murder took place in must be described. The *Al-Hawidzah* was a medium-sized pig, measuring less than a stadium from the iron spire of its beak to the curved wings of its tail. The skin surrounding the pig's aero belly was painted dark green to stand out clearly from the background. Both sides were marked with the emblem of the Manat Emirate of Korduby: Michzam and Rasub, holy swords from the Qudaid sanctuary (the company that built the *Al-Hawidzah* belonged to the emir's family; still few people could afford to buy an air pig).

The wooden nest, which grew on the pig's abdomen, was not even half a

stadium long and no more than twenty pous wide. The lower level was entirely taken up by the hold; beneath it, on barkwood frames and open steel frames, hundreds of lithos of additional cargo could be suspended. The aft capstans worked on the chains of the aerostat's main perpetua mobila. The upper level is intended for cabins for the crew and passengers, a dining room, a wheelhouse, a machine room and a bow observatory; in front of the machine room there was also a kitchen, washroom and a sanitary room. The main corridor separated two rows of cabins, seven in each; at both ends it connected with perpendicular corridors that opened onto the "observation deck" that ran around the entire upper level, that is, a narrow balcony from which one could look straight into the cloudy abysses. The viewing deck was secured with a dense mesh made of likot woven fabric, stretching from the edge of the wooden floor to the green underbelly of the pig. — even a child won't fall out through an eye the size of your hand.

It was also possible to go directly to the balcony from the cabins, each of them had two opposite doors: one opening onto this central corridor, the "backbone" of the pig, and the other — outside. On both sides of the external doors there were narrow windows, usually steamed up. But no one looked through them when the murder took place.

Mr. Hieronim Berbelek, together with Porte and Anton, occupied cabins Θ-I, the first from the bow on the starboard side. The next two, K-Λ, were occupied by Alithea and Abel. Esthle Amitace and her slave Zueia settled into cabins A-B, which were located on the port side, opposite Hieronim's cabins. Ihmet Zajdar chose the true aft cabin Ξ.

The remaining passengers of the *Al-Hawidzah* should be introduced. Mr. Berbelek met them for the first time at dinner on Aprilis 22nd. It was Dies Martis and rare meats were served, the smell of hot pork filled the aft dining room. Captain Azuz Wawzar raised a toast to a successful journey. "Fair winds!" replied Vukatius, the Gothic merchant (cabin E). The Demiurgos Meteo, a taciturn young man of a dark-skinned morph, merely bowed his head. At the place of honor at the captain's right hand sat Esthle Amitace. It was beyond discussion, one movement of her fan, the flash of the emerald eye of her snake bracelet was enough; now she just raised an eyebrow; and Wawzar stopped mid-sentence. Mr. Berbelek sat on the captain's left hand. Next, there was the Trett family, Gaila and Anna with their three children (cabins Γ-Δ); from Gaila's comment about the roast, Mr. Berbelek assumed that they were going

to Alexandria for a relative's wedding. Opposite the Tretts, on the right of Shulima, Alithea and Abel were seated, as there were no aristocrats.

On the first day, the *Al-Hawidzah* often changed wind paths, they rose and fell, the pneumators were working at full speed, driving the likot blades of the windmills, so in addition to all the other sensations, there was a constant gentle trembling throughout the aerostat, sometimes in faster, sometimes slower waves. — and Alithea began to feel nauseous after the first hour. She came for dinner, but she didn't eat anything; Abel teased her, devouring the slabs of red meat with a smile. Alithea, slightly pale and fanning herself with an energy that threatened to dislocate her wrist, engaged in an animated conversation with her neighbor to distract herself. It was Zabachai, one of the three Babylonians (cabins Z, H, N), young guards of the Seven-Fingers, returning home through Aegypt. The other two were called Urcz and Kistej or Gistej — because the latter was very difficult to understand, he stuttered and lisped, and at the same time fell into nervous tremors. His companions explained that he had received such an unfortunate blow to the head during a recent tavern fight; Nebuchadnezzar's morph was supposed to help him get his act together. Meanwhile, the first signs of the loss of Form were already showing: Gistej began to grow hair on his eyelids and the palms of his hands, a fingernail emerged from the cartilage of his left ear, and the skin on his forearms changed color, becoming covered with purple spots. Apparently he couldn't fall asleep unless he was standing up, and in his sleep he chewed on wood, shelves and chairs. Everyone glanced at him suspiciously during meals. The last passenger (cabin M) was a middle-aged Neurgian woman who regularly travels to the Alexandria Library every few months on behalf of the Vodenburg Academy (as the captain had mentioned). She dressed in men's shalwars and had Nordic tattoos on her arms. During her first dinner, she immediately got drunk on red wine. When she fell asleep, she snored loudly. Shulima smacked her fan and Wawzar, tugging at his beard, called two shipboard doulos, who almost forcibly dragged the Neurgian staggering to her cabin. Mr. Berbelek did not learn her name at that time. — By getting drunk He quoted a classic to Ihmet Zajdar when the door behind the doulos closed "A man voluntarily goes into slavery." "I-I've always had a st-st-strong he-head" said Kistej. They spoke in Ock and Greek. Mr. Berbelek ate in silence. Nobody paid any attention to him.

In the evening he went out to the viewing deck to smoke tobacco. Offensive plans should be devised in peace, in moments of complete emotional detachment and cold indifference to the homeland and the enemy. Similarly, criminal plans.

Place. Time. Method. Will I have to look her in the face? (But what if she doesn't come from the Warlock?) Will I have to. He inhaled deeply the warm smoke. I will have to.

The pig swayed under his feet, they were jumping from the crest of one wind to another, he grabbed onto the likot net. Leaning forward, he looked down. The wind whistled between his fingers, ruffled his hair, and extinguished the pyr. The setting Sun spread watery shadows on all the unevenness of the earth and the arabesques of the landscape, *Al-Hawidzah* flew over the land of a thousand lakes of twilight. Valleys, gorges; the slopes, everything is flooded with shadow, from above it is impossible to see whether anything else is moving in this flood of darkness, the rider — a barely noticeable dot, a riverboat — a white sail sticking out above the surface of the floodplain. Only when you look at one selected detail, fix your eyes on it, only then can you notice its movement, its slow, steady escape.

Mr. Berbelek heard the door creak.

"How does she feel?" he asked.

"She fell asleep, she's not vomiting anymore" replied Abel. "Porte gave her some herbs. Mistress Amitace's slave brought a letter to you. How high are we? If that net goes..."

"It won't go." Mr. Berbelek threw the tobacco, the wind immediately carried it away, they didn't see the butt falling to the ground. "In Alexandria...I will establish an annuity fund for you, I will give you executor rights, Alithea will take over the management of her part when she turns sixteen; yours will be secured."

"Will you go hunting with Zajdar? Nothing will happen to you. Take me, I'm not a child, you don't have to take care of me. What's going on anyway? If you die, we still inherit from you, right?"

"Never mind, don't worry."

"The captain promised to show me the machine room tomorrow."

"That's nice of him."

They both looked to their right as Gistej emerged from the N cabin onto the

observation deck. He bowed slightly; they bowed. Then he started humming something under his breath, rocking rhythmically on his heels. They went back inside.

Esthle Amitace's letter was not what Hieronim expected. *Perhaps I can help your daughter. I'll come after dark. Will you allow it? Send a servant.* Yes, she saw it, though, the girl's green face as she ran from the table; and then in the corridor, bent in half. Alithea didn't come to the supper and Amitace, of course, started asking questions. Does she really care, or does she just want to curry favor with me and pull the wool over my eyes? He sent Anton.

Shulima appeared with her slave, a black-haired girl of the Roman morph with long, slender limbs and a snow-white smile. Zueia woke Alithea up gently. Mr. Berbelek looked at Shulima questioningly. She pointed to the door to the balcony.

It was already very cold, the women wrapped themselves in shawls, and Hieronim put on a coat. Oil lamps burned at the bow and stern, and light from the cabins fell outside through narrow windows. — but as soon as Abel closed the door behind him, thick night wrapped around them.

Night, but pierced with yellow-red moonlight. The moon was full, a heavy pyrokian lantern suspended in the middle of the sky — when you looked at it straight, it was almost blinding. Gistej must have really been blinded, the Babylonian stood motionless, with his back against the wall, his eyes wide open, saliva dripping down his chin.

"Asleep" Abel muttered.

"Leave me alone" Alithea moaned, not fully awake "what's the matter, you can't even sleep, Abel, tell them — "

"Shhh." Shulima put her arm around Alithea and leaned towards her; with her other hand she gently cupped her chin and turned her face towards the Moon. "Look" she whispered "He is not still, he flows, we all flow with him, wave upon wave, upon wave, you cannot resist, you cannot oppose, you flow with him, you flow with us. Take it."

Zueia, who had disappeared for a moment, now appeared with a metal bowl half filled with water. She handed it to Alithea. The girl blinked, looked at

Abel, at her father, at Shulima, at the bowl, back at Shulima, and accepted the dish hesitantly.

Esthle Amitace released Alithea.

"Straighten your arms" she said. "Move away from the wall, you're standing on your own two feet, no one will knock you down. Look at his reflection. You're swimming. Don't look away! You're floating, you can't fall over. She's not heavy at all. You ride on clear waves. Composure. he knows the body well. Look."

Mr. Berbelek crossed his arms and took off his coat.

"What kind of goetia is this?" he hissed at Shulima. "Witchcraft is good for the common people, you don't believe in this nonsense."

"Shhh." She didn't even turn her head. "No magic. You can't tell me that you didn't teach your soldiers some primitive ways to cheat desire, ignore pain, and defend themselves against fear. These are always similar tricks that allow us to more easily bend our form to the need. A man is a man because he is able to change according to his own will, this is true, but this does not mean that we are all equal to God's ideas about ourselves. It's not that easy. You have to be able to cheat and lie to yourself. Don't disturb me, Esthlos."

Alithea stood gazing at the reflection of the Moon in the silver water in a round bowl held at chest level, her long dark hair falling in straight curtains — did she really keep her eyes on the bright reflection, or did she fall asleep like that, hypnotized, she and the cacomorphic Babylonian, only she stands on her own, bare feet on the wooden deck, legs bending even before the Pig sways, forward, in backwards, sideways, the Moon will not pour out of the bowl, there is no law, they ride on the same wave.

Abel cleared his throat and Mr. Berbelek looked up. At one point, while they weren't looking, the academic librarian emerged from her cabin. Wearing an unbuttoned shirt, with a bitten apple in her hand, she was now breathing the night air deeply , leaning her shoulder against the door. Gistej, was on her right, but naturally she was observing not him, but the mystery of the water and the Moon arranged by Amitace. Hieronim caught the Neurgian's gaze for a moment: a sober, focused look.

"C-c-cold, it's a plague" Abel muttered, his teeth chattering, and he hid in

his cabin.

"How much longer?" asked Mr. Berbelek.

Amitace raised her hand, the wide sleeve of her dark dress fell down.

"Silence, please."

Did this pretentious ritual work and Alithea really managed to impose such a strong form of physiology on herself, or did Porte's herbs work? — In either case, the next day her seasickness disappeared without a trace. She ate dinner with the greatest appetite, showing sincere interest in Zabachai, a zealous adept of the art of flirtation and seduction. Shulima gave Hieronim a knowing smile; he didn't answer, remaining silent as usual. Anyway, a loud quarrel immediately broke out between Vukatius and Gaila Trett. As could be concluded from the latter's curses, he accused the Goth of evil intentions towards his wife. At first the merchant laughed, which infuriated Mr. Trett even more; he lunged at the Goth across the table. Again the captain had to call the doulos, and they took the quarreling people to their cabins. The other passengers watched the incident with barely concealed amusement; Mrs. Trett herself could hardly contain her laughter.

After lunch, Azuz Wawzar took everyone on a short tour of the Aerostat. Abel and the Trett children were, of course, going to stick their noses into every nook and cranny of the pig; Urcz and Hieronim had had enough after visiting the engine room. The room was cramped, like all aerostat rooms, and almost entirely filled with an intricate artifact of metal, leatherette, and hard-formed glass that was constantly shaking. — it was from this that the irritating vibration came through the aerostat. There were hisses, rumbles, screeches and thuds coming from inside the structure, as if a herd of angry daemons were racing inside these pipes, boxes and retorts. Having entered first — Wawzar had to unlock half a dozen padlocks and bolts — they didn't close the door behind them, after all, they were immediately sweating, the temperature and humidity were worthy of Roman baths.

The captain had to raise his voice to be heard, the southern accent in his Greek-tainted accent becoming even more pronounced. He addressed his words to the youngest, explaining everything as if to children, bending and almost crouching before the little Trett sons.

"All Matter is composed of four elements: Fire, pyr, Water, hydor, Air, aeru, and Earth, ge. For terrestrial objects — unlike the heavenly bodies, which are said to be made of some fifth element, the pempton stoicheion: quintessence, aether — for earthly objects, the natural state is rest. Each item strives to achieve its proper place here: rolling stone, falling rain, rising smoke. Earth weighs lowest, above it Water, above it Air, above it Fire. You see it every day. Throw a stone into the lake — it will fall to the bottom. In a closed vessel, the liquid always settles at the bottom and the air presses upwards. Fire springs upwards through every air. This is natural movement. But there is also unnatural, forced movement that lasts only as long as the compulsion lasts: moving people and animals, the objects they move. Man, who is the only being who is aware of the nature of reality and is able to bend it to his will, is able to change the Form not only of himself, but also of other objects: a craftsman transforming the lump of the Earth into a pot, a breeder creating new varieties of plants. We call those with special will talents demiurgoi; the keros bends under their work especially easily. Those who are able to impose Final Forms on Matter, towards which it strives from now on even in their absence, trapped forever in a new path of perfection, we call them teknitoi. An Air Teknites has changed the morphology of a small amount of air captured here in such a way that from now on its natural state is movement, like the movement of stars and planets, so it circulates tirelessly in this circulation, driving the blades of the windmill. The windmill forces the aerostat to move forward and as long as it is spinning, The *Al-Hawidzah* can fly even against the air currents. It would be even easier than Aeru to impose a Form of Aether movement on Fire, but Pyr is virtually impossible to use in any devices. It is impossible to bring Aether to Earth and incorporate it into any machine; They say that the Moonfolk know how to use it. In the fourth century of the Alexandrian Era, The Hero of Alexandria constructed a similar steam machine, but it had to be constantly heated, burned under water, and fed fire. However, this automaton here is called a pneumaton and was invented by a great Vodenburg sophistes named Ire Gauke, you have certainly heard about it. Apparently, in Herdon they also use pneumatons to move around the Earth's surface, although it is certainly more uncomfortable and slower than traveling on the back of an animal or in a carriage. Similarly, pneumaton sea ships are slower and more unreliable than the sailing ships operated by the demiurgoi and teknitoi of Water and Air. For in the end it is the Form of man, the anthropomorphe, that always wins.

Mr. Berbelek withdrew without a word. He passed Zueia in the spine

corridor; After looking back at him, the slave girl turned into the bathroom.

Alithea was not interested in the secrets of the aerostat, Esthle Amitace invited her to her cabin. Mr. Berbelek agreed when his daughter asked, because he couldn't refuse, after last night the Form between him and Shulima completely ruled out refusal. Then he asked Alithea what they were doing. She shrugged. "We talked, played chess, she let me wear her jewelry. Nothing special." But Mr. Berbelek knew that this is how it all begins, we are most defenseless in boring ordinariness.

Before supper, the Neurgian woman visited him. Her name was Magdalena Leese. She seemed to want to apologize for her behavior yesterday, but Hieronim sensed some hidden intention, a specific goal behind her attempts to engage him in an open conversation. They didn't know each other, just random co-travellers, so what could she mean? About this night ritual? But he did not allow her to be trapped in the bonds of intimacy, he excused himself by the way of overdue correspondence. Porte stood in the corner of the cabin the entire time, watching and listening, a cold counterpoint to the woman's clumsy attempts at cordiality.

The supper was quiet, everyone was silent, Mr. Berbelek did not stand out. Wishing them good night, the captain announced that the next day they would pass the King of Storms, they should turn off all unnecessary lamps, hide oils, strong alcohols, flammable substances, and to be careful with tobacco.

As they returned to their cabins, Amitace stopped Hieronim and Ihmet for a moment. "We have not yet determined the details of your stay in Alexandria. Laetitia will certainly invite you to her palace; I will invite you on her behalf. Surely you won't refuse? Esthlos? Mr. Zajdar?" The nimrod glanced at Berbelek, seemingly questioningly, but Hieronim was standing close enough for the hunter's crown to embrace him, he understood the context immediately. Under the same roof! Available day and night! Let the predator into the pen! Invite the vampire! The victim will not be denied.

"With pleasure."

As he undressed for bed, Mr. Berbelek wondered about the Persian's motivation. That he encouraged him to attack faster, to pre-empt the assassination, is no wonder, it was in his nature, he was who he was, there is no need to look for additional motives for it. A hunting wolf: he's a wolf, he hunts. But but. Let's assume that he lied, that he didn't see the Warlock in Shulima's entourage

at all, that he wasn't in Chersonez at all, that it was some kind of joke, revenge, conspiracy...

Hieronim immediately reflected: I don't want to believe him, because I have already immersed myself so deeply in Amitace's anthos, any more and I wouldn't believe in her meanness, even if I saw it with my own eyes; I mean, yes, I will believe it, but it won't matter, what will be much more important will be Shulima's smile, her quiet satisfaction, her satisfaction with me, I would forgive everything.

So who is right? Whose side is right? In the clash of Forms, reason and logic are of no use, like the world there is only one measure here: strength. Between Zajdar and Amitace, like between a rock and a hard place — this is the shape I will take when they hit. Mr. Hieronim Berbelek, indeed, strategos Berbelek, he could —

A scream, a deadly scream, half human, half animal, pierced the walls of the cabin and jerked Hieronim to his feet. This is from outside, from the balcony — he moved to the door before thinking — that's the scream when shrapnel shreds guts and a bullet crushes their bones. He was barefoot in his pants and opened the door, tripped over the threshold, swore, lost his balance, and smacked his temple against the door frame. Confused, he ran out to the observation deck.

The cold wind instantly woke him up. He narrowed his eyes; when he stepped out of the light into the night, he saw everything as two-dimensional patches of shadow. In any case, the deck was empty — he looked back and towards the bow, and when he turned his head back, the deck was no longer empty, Ihmet Zajdar left his cabin, the last in the row, Ξ. Dressed in a multi-colored silk jiba, he wrapped its long tails with one hand and reached inside for the lamp with the other and lifted it upwards. The pig swayed slightly, shadows dancing, chased away by the yellow glow. Ihmet pointed to the safety net on his left hand. They approached, meeting at the level of M's cabin. The likot braid was cut here, there was a vertical hole in the net, a good four pous long, the torn edges of the braid fluttered in the wind, the tough fringes.

More doors opened and more passengers appeared: stuttering Kistej, Abel and Alithea in hastily donned cloaks, Porte and Anton, and finally the two remaining Babylonians and Shulima. Only Vukatius, Magdalena Leese and Mr. and Mrs. Trett were not curious about the cause of the night's commotion.

In this crowd, when everyone was pushing as far as possible to get closer to the source of the confusion, one more violent jump of the aerostat would have been enough for someone to fall through the cut, Hieronim himself had already been pushed towards it several times, the balcony was very narrow.

"What happened?"

"Who was screaming?"

"Would you be so kind as not to step on my toes!"

"Can someone tell me..."

"Esthlos! Are you alright?

"Can Mr. Zajdar..."

"Someone cut it, you see."

"He's bleeding."

"Mm, I think so..."

"But who was screaming?!"

Six voices, two languages, a full range of emotions, from hysteria to irony. Mr. Berbelek waited for Captain Wawzar to appear and restore order, but the Arab did not come; only the two doulos appeared and stood back, confused, not knowing what to do. Besides, Hieronim was probably the shortest one here, he couldn't see over the heads of the people gathered, and he still ran. Clinging to the net with one hand, he was shooing away Urcz leaning towards the cut with the other.

He caught Porte's gaze briefly. The servant pointed to his head. "You're bleeding, Esthlos."

Mr. Berbelek reached for his forehead, at that moment the *Al-Hawidzah* tilted slightly, the Babylon guardsman bumped into him with his full weight. Mr. Berbelek pushed him away, elbowing him in the ribs.

"Be silent!" he growled. "All of you! To your cabins! Zajdar stays. You! Get the captain. Now!"

They obeyed the orders as quickly as possible.

When he remained alone with the nimrod on the balcony, he bowed his head to him.

"Shine your light. There's a wound, I feel blood. Take a look."

"Ouch, quite a deep cut, I think you can see the bone. A dull blade. Is that it?"

"What? Who?"

"How he fell."

They both looked at the cut braids. Mr. Berbelek took one of its loose lines between two of his fingers.

"Likot" he muttered in astonishment.

Likot trees, once morphed from oak and cedar in the century-old orchards of the most famous teknites flora, Philippa of Gaul, were valued for the incredible strength and lightness of their fibers. Likot was often used instead of hard metals when its weight was an equally important criterion for choosing material — to look no further, three-quarters of the air pig's nest was made of likot. The likot mesh was practically impossible to cut, there are no knives so sharp, no people so strong.

Mr. Berbelek thoughtfully touched the wound on his temple and looked up at Nimrod.

Ihmet blinked and tugged at his beard.

"Not me" he whispered. It wasn't me.

That's all he had time for, because Captain Wawzar was already running up with three doulos and a sleepy demiurgos Meteo.

"Order the slaves to check all passengers and crew members" Mr. Berbelek said to the Arab before he could open his mouth. "Have them ask where they were when they heard the scream, and who can testify to it. Assign people to fix this hole, we have children on board. Send clean bandages to my cabin, I'm going to wash up. The doulos will report to my servant. Were you sleeping?"

"Yes."

"I see.

Mr. Berbelek returned to his cabin. He hissed with every step. He then looked at the nail of the big toe on his left foot. He was already completely black with blood. With his head washed and bandaged, Hieronim examined the fragment of the door frame that he had hit (a smudged red mark remained on it). No sharp edges, sharp splinters, protruding nails; smoothly planed wood.

Porte repeated the information brought by the doulos. Mr. Berbelek sent him for the captain. Together they entered the M cabin. The bed was still made, the lamps were on, there were two books on the table, there was a cup full of wine, some had spilled around. They checked the luggage. The pants they had seen her in during the day were missing; and probably one shalwar or shirt, but they couldn't tell. "Are you sure she's nowhere to be found?" Hieronim was sure. The Ishmaelite shook his head. "They searched every corner of *Al-Hawidzah*, Esthlos."

Why would anyone kill Magdalena Leese, the librarian of the Vodenburg Academy? For money? Ha! Theoretically, she could have jumped out on her own, but that would have made it a suicide, and he didn't see a similar flaw in her Form. So someone murdered her, cutting the likot net and pushing Magdalena out of the aerostat. Did she know any of the passengers of the *Al-Hawidzah* before? If so, they both hid it very well. But why would a random fellow traveler kill her? After all, the reason would have to have arisen during one and a half days of the journey so far. Considering she was drunk the first day... Today she came to me, she wanted to find out something, she wanted to open honesty between us; I shoved this Form down her throat. Now he's dead. The librarian.

He went back out onto the balcony. They flew with the wind, the air was a legal calm, the moon emerged from behind the clouds. The slave worked on the damaged net, tying it with likot ropes. When he saw Hieronim, he knelt down on one knee, bowing his head low.

Mr. Berbelek looked around the row of closed doors; there was still light everywhere, a dull glow filtered through the narrow windows.

"It's almost in the middle, he wouldn't have had time to run around, to the

bow or stern corridor, he only had two or three seconds before I left. I would've see him, or at least heard him."

"You're right, Esthlos, it must have been someone from those cabins" Wawzar Replied. "Who's here, hmm, Mr. Zajdar, Mr. Gistej, hmm your children, Esthlos and, hmm, your servants..."

"Idiot. Which was the easiest way for him to escape? Where was his nearest hiding place?" Mr. Berbelek pointed to the door in front of which they were standing. "He knew very well that Leese's cabin was empty."

"Ah. Of course. Then he could walk down the center corridor to his cabin and exit as if nothing had happened."

Mr. Berbelek shook his head.

"I don't think so. Passengers will have to be questioned in the morning. If anyone saw him leaving the victim's cabin... He either ran straight away and was very lucky, or he waited. Some didn't show here at all.

"Mr. Trett and Mr. Vukacius"

Mr. Berbelek raised his hand.

"No, and you won't say anything like that." He turned to the slave. "You! I will flog you."

The doulos covered his ears and closed his eyes.

"Nothing, nothing, nothing" he repeated, bowing.

Mr. Berbelek nodded to the captain.

"Good night."

"Goodnight, Esthlos."

Hieronim returned to Magdalena Leese's cabin. What was she doing then? Did she go out to the balcony to get some night air or, for example, talk to the murderer? He probably came, knocked, could you say a word, you haven't gone to bed yet, I won't take up much, maybe here, I won't go into a lonely woman's cabin — and when she turned around...

What did he find her doing? She poured herself some wine. Mr. Berbelek sniffed. A cheap little rose. He likes wine, we all know that. She liked it. Anyway, she didn't have time to drink it. Books. He opened the first one. *The Fifth Kratistos War* by Oryx Bryte. He leafed through it. No bookmarks, no notes. It doesn't look like it's read often. He opened the second one. He didn't recognize the alphabet, pre-Hellenic pictography, some symbols simplified almost to letters, but also quite complicated pictures, head, horns, horse, cart, ship, hand, wing, wave. Who prints such things? This can't be profitable. He leafed through it, stopping at the engravings. Front of the palace. Some triangular square. Women in kafton dresses, at least with exposed breasts and compressed waists (the engravings were not of the best quality). A man with a lion's head, a man with a bird's head. Double-bladed axe. Dancing people, naked. A Bull. A warrior in a loincloth, with a spear and an oval shield. A farmer in the field, leaning over a plow. A woman with —

Mr. Berbelek moved the book closer to the lamp.

A woman with a bowl in her outstretched hands, naked, the full moon above her, another woman next to her, in a kafton dress, a dove above her head, a snake under her feet.

Mr. Berbelek drank the wine and took the book.

THE Storm King was one of the many kratistoi lost in the Second War, in 320 after the Fall of Rome. His real name was Julius Cadetius, son of Julius, but only historians knew about that. When he was born, a seven-day storm raged over the Iberian Peninsula, from which almost all the towns and villages of the peninsula suffered from lightning and winds. The Storm King's Anthos has always been at its strongest in Fire and Air. However, it was not strong enough to withstand the pressure of the kratistoi whose auras it was adjacent to: K'Azury, who eventually took all of Iberia under his wing, Meuzulek the Black and Joseph the Just from northern Africa, Sixtus from Rome, Bella Aphrodita from the Alps. He tried to escape to Corsica and then other islands in the Mediterranean, but the territory was already divided and the keros was freezing. He didn't want another war. So he went into exile voluntarily, but took his city, Oroneia, with him. Oroneia was built on high rocks above cliffs washed from the south by the warm waves of the Mediterranean Sea. Originally an Alexandrian fortress, then an Arab city, one of the trading centers of the Ishmaelites of St.

Mary, never besieged or destroyed, it has retained its eclectic Hellenic-Oriental architecture and the profile of a cone with gentle slopes, with a stone citadel with white walls and stocky towers in the middle, on the top, and with low, garden buildings on the slopes; even lower there were satellite "market villages", behind which there were fields and vineyards. The Storm King took it all with him. He started by morphing these rocks, a stadium below the ground surface, on which the entire plateau rested. He didn't have a good sense of ge, but he also didn't want to make the Earth more Earth; on the contrary. Since he signed the Humble Letter at K'Azury's request, he was given time. After thirty-three years, the rocks of Oroneia, whose Form was for the most part a Form of Fire and Air, began to move towards their new natural resting place: in the sky, twenty stadia above the shining blue of the Mediterranean Sea, at the junction of the anthos of K'Azury, Bella, Sixtus and Joseph the Just. On clear, cloudless days, sailors could see Oroneia, a small ellipse of shadow beneath the Sun; it was invisible from land. Mostly, however, the sight of it was considered a bad omen, and sailing along these routes was discouraged: Oroneans simply threw their waste and garbage into the sea, and whole legends circulated in the ports of Europe and Africa about ships destroyed by the "spit of the Storm King", people drowned, loads lost. Moreover, the weather has always been capricious here, the anthos of the Storm King, strengthening the Form of fire and air, was constantly creating hurricanes, storms and tornadoes. This was partly a conscious morph of Julius, who had to somehow provide Oroneia with a constant supply of fresh water. However, since the popularization of air pigs, Oroneia emerged from isolation and opened up to trade, and a stone's Form changed in the crown of the Storm King, the so-called oroneiges, became a very sought-after building material. Apparently, entire "air palaces", aerogarons, were built from it in Alexandria, the dreams realized by crazy architects. At least that's what Esthle Amitace told Hieronim.

Captain Wawzar raised the *Al-Hawidzah* to the height of the upper clouds so that they could get a good look at the city of the Storm King. They passed it from the east, at a distance of several stadia (Wawzar added some to their route). Every passenger gathered on the right viewing deck. It was early morning, the sun was on the other side of the aerostat, they were hidden in shadow, they could see the orchards, fields and suburbs of the sky metropolis bathed in pure, warm light, the toothed battlements and mighty towers of the Storm King's citadel. Red and yellow banners, several dozen pous long, fluttered on these towers in the stream's strong wind, fiery serpents. They saw movement in the

fields and streets, carts and horses, and tiny silhouettes of people, but they were unable to see smaller details. Of course, what interested everyone the most was windweeds, cultivated plants morphed from edible vines by the Oronean teknitoi flora. They flowed far beyond the edges of the earth and in heavy, thick weaves, several stadia long, waved majestically in the wind. — green tentacles of a stone jellyfish. Azuz Wawzar told how in late autumn, when the windweed harvest was taking place, Oroneans could be seen descending along the stems, fastened in leather harnesses, with crooked sword-sickles on their backs, hauling bundles of ropes with hooks and loops. These were also the days of the calmest weather.

The *Al-Hawidzah* rose above the last clouds, above her there was only a bright sky, below — mountains and plateaus of honey clouds. It was hot at these heights regardless of the time of day or year. The passengers stood in the shade, and yet they were sweating after just a few minutes. Shulima carefully chose a light kafton dress, without a corset or collar, and Mr. Berbelek, whenever he looked at Amitace, could not shake off bad associations.

Slaves delivered drinks. Hieronim handed Shulima a cold glass.

"Thank you." She looked away from Oroneia floating above the clouds for a moment. Just behind Hieronim, where the three soldiers stood, the pattern of the likot braid was clearly broken by a series of thick knots and knobs. She indicated him with a nod of her head. "So who killed her?"

"I don't know."

"It was on your orders that we were interrogated, wasn't it, Esthlos? You certainly learned something."

"Everyone was in their cabins. Alone or with servants or family. Except for Mr. Urcz, who was playing dice with Mr. Zabachai at the latter's place. Someone is lying. Who? No one saw the killer leaving Leese's cabin."

"Oh, so he was in her cabin."

"Maybe that's why she died. She had some item or information compromising the murderer."

"Hmm." Amitace sipped the diluted wine slowly, staring at the sunny Oroneia. Throwing her braid over her left shoulder, she grabbed the net with her right hand and the *Al-Hawidzah* wobbled slightly. "Someone who can cut it..."

"So you still want to take Ihmet Zajdar with you on this hunt, Esthle?"

She smiled out of the corner of her mouth.

"You're not going to tell the captain to imprison him, are you? What? As soon as he sets foot on Hypatia's land..."

"The Emir of Corduba has no power in Alexandria."

"That's it."

"In the future, I must be more careful with whom I board a ship or a pig."

"You, Esthlos?" Shulima laughed.

"I saw you last night. You would give an order and -"

"Sorry. I need to change my dressings."

He hid in his cabin. The impression was difficult to deny. She knows that I know. He knows that I realize it. It wasn't a form of flirting — Shulima consciously irritated the predator and stroked the lion with her bloody hand.

He looked in the mirror. Lion! Good for you! If it were Hieronim Berbelek from before Kolenica... He clenched his fists on the table top. She would fall in fear at my feet! She would confess everything at one word from me. Or at least she wouldn't mock me to my face.

He sat down and poured himself some wine. Composure. Think like a strategos. (What would Hieronim Berbelek do in your place?) Circumstances, occasions, probabilities, motives, facts. She wasn't able to kill Leese. In fact, Zajdar was the only one on the *Al-Hawidzah* who could do it; she knows it, I know it. But the nimrod had no motive, motive — like some secret connection through knowledge from an old book — Shulima had. Would he kill for her? After all, he is the one who convinces me that her death is necessary! By all the gods...!

Why am I going to damned Alexandria?

THE worst thing was that he could no longer remain silent during the re-

maining lunches and dinners. Of course, they questioned him about the death of Magdalena Leese; suddenly it turned out that he was a kind of military commander of an aerostat, a hegemon without an army. But he made himself one — they only followed the form he imposed.

Besides, he didn't leave his cabin. But that wasn't the solution either. They sent slaves to him with invitations "for qahwa", "for chess", "for hashish". He refused. He couldn't say no to Abel and Alithea. Night and day, his son and daughter discussed crime scenarios among themselves. Alithea was betting on Gistej, Abel hesitated between Vukatius and Captain Wawzar. Mr. Berbelek listened patiently to their fantastic theories. Alithea was at least funny in her childish excitement, but Abel — Abel considered the failure of the investigation to be a personal failure of strategos Berbelek and made more or less veiled reproaches to Hieronim for "letting the murderer go unpunished." Abel knew what kind of father he had, better than Mr. Berbelek himself, and Abel's father would never let such an insult go unpunished. Murder right outside his bedroom door!

"What will they think of you if you don't bring the killer to his knees? Especially after you publicly accepted responsibility yourself."

Mr. Berbelek shrugged.

"Yes, it was a mistake; it won't happen again."

During meals he had to watch Shulima carelessly flirting with the captain, imposing her authority on all the men on board, and then on the women as well. A fan, a smile, a round chest, a warm voice with an aristocratic accent, dazzling gratitude for every small courtesy, a manicured hand that lands for a brief moment on your arm, shoulder, cheek, like a summer butterfly, the zephyr of the morning, a floral perfume goes to your head, an unspoken promise disturbs thoughts. After all, this is exactly how she wrapped Minister Bruge and the Neurgians around her finger — Who is Wawzar or Vukatius in comparison to defend against her morph? Even Ihmet Zajdar fell under the spell of Shulima, or at least he assumed such a pretense, perhaps in order not to stand out. — or maybe he was just playing earlier, when he was pouring these poisonous accusations into Hieronim's ears? Mr. Berbelek said nothing more.

On the evening of Aprillis 25th, in Dies Veneris, they saw a bright flash low on the southern horizon, a spark of cold fire — the light of the great lighthouse

of Pharos. The *Al-Hawidzah* descended towards Alexandria.

H.
Under the Nebuchadnezzar Sun

THE anchorage of the air pigs was on the Gulf of Eunostos, at the Gate of the Moon, and the palace of Esthle Laetitia Lotte π. Zagis was located on the other side of the city, on Lake Mareotea, they had to pass through the center of the so-called Old Alexandria, that is, through the quarters enclosed in the oldest defensive walls, dating back to the 25th year of the Alexandrian Era, that is, from the time when, on the orders of the Great Alexander, on the site of the village of Raqotis, the first buildings were made of brick and stone. Esthle Shulima Amitace pointed to the directions of the world with her complex fan, the dark silhouettes of buildings outlined with the fiery purple of the sky at dusk, compared to the Vodenburg sky — huge, colorful, juicy like overripe fruit. Shulima rode in the first pack, together with Hieronim and Alithea, Ihmet Zajdar and Abel rode in the second, and then there was a chain of sixteen wiktyka loaded with traveling trunks, and many of these trunks, as Berbelek supposed, had been transferred from the "Okusta" to the "Al - Hawidzah" and now from it to two-wheelers, without having been opened even once for over a month. Hieronim's servants and Amitace's slave were riding in the last wiktyka. Shulima also hired a gang of naked boys and girls at the port, probably a forty-strong horde of filthy men in all, to escort them through the city, running alongside the carriages and fending off beggars, thieves, self-appointed guides, pushy street vendors, priests, and thieves. In the process, the Esthle's

fluency in Pahlavi came to light. Although the inhabitants of Alexandria can be expected to know Greek, most of the native poor, especially those from the eastern Canopic districts, do not know more than a few polite Greek phrases, Shulima warned. Now she described the sights she passed in soft, courtly Greek.

They drove from west to east, facing the night constellation opening over the city, with the last glow of the dying Sun behind them. The Canopic Road ran straight as far as the Sun Gate, and on to the western mouth of the Nile, along the Old Canal, passing Canopis, Menout, and Herakleion. — once independent cities, now completely absorbed by Alexandria. Apart from Dzunguo's unimaginable Asian metropolis, Alexandria was the largest city in the world. According to the census made in the time of Hypatia XII, within the borders of the capital of Aegypt — including satellite towns and villages — over five million people. Since its founding, Alexandria has continually grown and gained in power and importance — but what else could you expect from the city of The First Kratistos? Although historians claimed this was not true, the kratistos now resident in Alexandria, Nebuchadnezzar the Golden, steadfastly maintained the legend that he was the great-grandson of Alexander the Great; this continuity was good for the city. Esthle Amitace pointed out buildings that were five hundred, one thousand, two thousand years old. The original design was prepared by Deinocrates, based on the plans of Hippodamus of Miletus. This is where the cross-shaped layout of the two main streets, the Canopic Road and the Beleutian Road, comes from. They intersect in the heart of Old Alexandria; the poets christened this intersection the Market Square of the World. As Amitace gestured towards it with her outstretched hand, the municipal slaves lit the first pyrokian lanterns. From then on, the procession moved between two parallel rows of yellow lights. The lanterns were very tall, taller than the palm trees.

As the Canopy Road jumped over the first canal, Shulima pointed to the right, south, the fan pointing above the line of lights, above the flat roofs. They saw only the shadows of the tops of the tallest buildings. —The Temple of Isis, The Temple of Serapis, The Temple of Manat, The Temple of Akasa, The Temple of Ohrmazda, The Temple of Kristos, The Temple of Poseidon, The Temple of Osiris. It has been rebuilt many times, but most of it dates back to the Alexandrian Era. If gods exist, this is where they set their gaze every morning after waking up.

They have reached the World Market. In the middle of the intersection

stood a stone spire half a stadium high, topped by a golden statue of a man. The statue must also have been quite large, since Mr. Berbelek could easily see the gesture the golden man was making: with his right hand he raises his sword to the sky, and with his left he smooths the keros. It was, of course, Alexander of Macedon. The rope of the pole was wrapped around the spire. As they passed it, Shulima's fan pointed south again. "The Library. Everything that man has ever written."

Leaving Old Alexandria through the Sun Gate, they crossed the second canal and entered the Jewish quarter. Today, few Jews lived here, but the name remained; in this city names last the longest, Matter yields to time, but Form remains. Amitace pointed to the left, at the gigantic columns that formed the front of the Hellenic palace, a greasy shadow lingering between the stone pillars. "The Throne of Thrones; here, on his fortieth birthday, Alexander was crowned the King of the World."

They turned right. A unit of guardsmen on unicorns passed them. Black breastplates on white chimatas, white trouffas wrapped around their heads, beards trimmed in the Ishmaelite style, double kerounets with four-pous barrels and stocks painted with colorful patterns on their backs, moon swords at their belts. The unicorns were morphed from zebras, their brushed black and white fur gleaming as if greased in the honey glow of the pyrokian lamps. Mr. Berbelek closed his eyes. He wanted to feel what this city smelled like, to breathe its flavor, the sign of the morph, into his lungs — but the only thing he felt was the smell of Shulima's perfume. Somewhere along the Mediterranean Sea, she switched from Egyptian scents to more delicate, plant scents. — jasmine? klutra? ful? She sat at Hieronim's left hand, their hips and thighs touched, he felt the heat of her body through her clothes; when she turned to point with her fan at something above him, as she often did, her chest pressed lightly against Mr. Berbelek's shoulder. While still on board the acrostat, she dressed according to the Alexandrian fashion, that is, the fashion of Nebuchadnezzar: in a long, floor-length white skirt fastened high at the waist, a wide silk scarf draped loosely over her shoulders (when she unfolded it to show it to Alithea, a phoenix embroidered with gold thread lit up in the rays of the setting sun) and a white cloth hat with a flat brim. Snake bracelets remained on the forearms. Before he lowered his eyelids, Mr. Berbelek saw the commander of the guard detachment bow to Amitace in the saddle as she briefly turned her gaze to him. He no longer saw Shulima's smile and the movement of her fan; he didn't have to, he knew this Form by heart. A dagger, it must be a dagger, he thought as they

drove south, through increasingly quieter neighborhoods, faster and faster, with fewer and fewer crowds. A dagger, and I won't turn my head. If I cannot stand face to face, if I cannot raise my hand, then I am truly unworthy of living, let the Warlock take what is his. But — he counted the heartbeats, seventeen, eighteen, good — but Ihmet's word is not enough, even if she killed Leese, it is not enough, even if she deceives me and wants my destruction in this damned Alexandria, why did I come here — too little, too little, I need confirmation. She's too beautiful. He opened his eyes. "The Parscids, the palace hills" she said, and the fan outlined the towering shadows with gentle gaps. "That is, not the hills, but this whole coast of Mareot was greatly remorphed during the Fifth Kratistos War, when Nebuchadnezzar displaced the Scarab Chimera; now it houses the city residences of the aristocracy. Of course, a lot of time is spent in the country estates up the Nile, and as far as I know, that's where Laetitia is now. — but who consciously gives up the benefits of Nebuchadnezzar's anthos? Not to mention that it's not wise to be away from the Hypatia's court for too long. Laetitia is related to her through her paternal grandmother, but... Here is her palace."

The wiktyka stopped for a moment in front of the gate, and the pair of breathless stallions leaned heavily on the crossbar. Esthle Amitace leaned toward one of the gate guards who approached the carriage. She whispered something in his ear and fluttered her fan. He bowed deeply, then shouted an order to open the gates. Slaves came running with lamps. A bunch of dock workers milled around the guard, who handed out one coin to each of them. Meanwhile, the gate opened and they entered among the palm trees and hievoi. The lights of the palace were slowly emerging from around the bend of the avenue, slaves were calling to each other from the darkness in three languages, the wheels of old hansoms creaked, a cool wind carried exotic scents from an invisible lake, birds of the night were making noise in the treetops, a rampart ran across the avenue, green eyes gleamed in the darkness of the night. Alithea squeezed Mr. Berbelek's right hand. "Thank you, thank you, Dad." He blinked. He defended himself, but to no avail; the morph of her happiness embraced him. A smile like a silent cry of victory, a smile like a cup of hot light. Without a word, he leaned down and kissed her on the forehead.

Anies Panatakis was a notorious tax evader. His right thumb had already been cut off three times for crimes against the Scarab. His name became

a synonym for dishonesty for Aegyptian customs officers. He employed seven accountants; the seventh one was solely responsible for keeping records of bribes. Panatakis had two wives, six sons, and eight daughters. Three sons and one daughter were dead. The oldest son helped his father run the business; the youngest fled to Herdon; Isman, Aneis's favorite, was awaiting beheading for piracy in the Alexandrian prison. For the daughters — two married customs officers, two worked as hetaeras. Panatakis also had sixteen grandchildren. In the right pocket of his julbab he carried a list with their descriptions and names — as he claimed, he had no memory for details.He gave the same explanation during the trial of two mercenaries who tried to kill him after attacking him at night — he couldn't remember their faces. A week later, the remains of their clothes, torn by crocodiles, were fished out of the Nile. Aneis Panatakis was the Alexandrian factor of the Njute, Ikita & Berbelek company.

Mr. Berbelek found him in the back of his warehouses. Panatakis offered him qahwa, quiquias, dates, invited him to his house three times, repented six times for the miserable conditions in which he had to receive such a wonderful guest, even more times he cursed his poverty, greedy tax collectors, the Hasypathia and Nebuchadnezzar, and called on all the gods for help (even here he had altars of Manat, Kristos and Mercury), he sighed for the good old days, shouted at the slave who showed up untimely with some news — and only then allowed Mr. Berbelek to present his case.

"Mhmmmm" he then sucked thoughtfully on the mouthpiece of his pipe "so you want, Esthlos, just to find out everything you can about her."

"Yes."

"And, I understand, this is not a request from Esthlos Njute."

"I gave you letters from him."

"Yeah. High aristocrat. A cousin of the Hypathia's. Mhm-mmm. More qahwy?"

"No thanks."

"Anyway, I'll send a man to you to negotiate with the African Company, Esthlos."

It was hot on the streets, the sun was burning away the last spots of shadow

from the cracks between the paving stones, from under the roofs of shops and pump rooms. Farad, the son of the seneschal of Esthle Lotte's house, was waiting at Mr. Berbelek's lodge, serving as Hieronim's guide through the city. At the sight of Mr. Berbelek, he stopped a loud argument with a merchant, bowed and helped the Esthlos into the carriage; only then did he get in himself, keeping an appropriate distance. Farad was wearing only a short skirt and sandals, and Hieronim, who had emerged from the shadows and was immediately covered in sweat, gave him a stern look.

"Where to now, Esthlos?" asked the young man.

"A tailor, good and fast."

"Oh, it's not a problem, Esthle Lotte uses the services of the best, and I think he should come to the palace today to take measurements from Esthle Latek.

"Who?"

"Esthle Alithea."

"Ah. Of course. How far is it from his studio? There's still plenty of time until noon. I need to change into something, um, not from Vodenburg." Farad's skin, like that of all Alexandrians, was a dark copper color. However, it was enough to live in Nebuchadnezzar's crown long enough for this.

The tailor, old Med, took the measurements himself, dismissing the workers with a wave of his hand. Mr. Berbelek ordered several sets of clothes and bought one ready-made, made for someone else, but: "He can wait" commented Med, pursing his lips. White on white: loose cotton shalwars, a spacious kirouffa made of cotton and silk, with a blue pattern on the sleeves. The kirouffa was an elegant version of the burnous, with floor-length skirts and a heavy hood. You could fasten it up, but you wore it unbuttoned during the day. The set included sandals, but Hieronim stuck to high-top Neurgian jugras. Med promised the rest of the clothes this week. He accompanied Mr. Berbelek to the gate, bowing constantly, but he had no illusions: the tailor actually bows to Esthle Lotte.

Climbing into the wiktyka, Hieronim hid his head in the shadow of his hood. Ihmet Zajdar waited, as he had promised, under the statue of Alexander in the World Square; Despite the crowd, they found him without any problems. After

casting a brief glance at Farad, he began immediately:

"Three things. First of all: the hunt. Interesting indeed, I'll show you what they bring from the south. I guess I won't waste my time, sooner or later I would probably go myself. I hear Daniel of Orme and old Lucinda are in town; I don't know if they are just going there or have already returned. Secondly: some good advice for Esthlos Njute: pashuba. A new herb. In the Golden Kingdoms, it is already replacing hashish. It goes north with incense caravans, soon it will jump from Europe to Herdon. Third: her. We have to decide: here or a hunting accident."

Zajdar also abandoned his European robes. Covered head-to-toe in a black julbab, with a bamboo staff in his hand, he looked like one of the Pilgrims to the Stone. Besides, maybe he actually intended to go to Al-Kaba. After all, he never openly declared his participation in the hunt with Esthle Amitace.

He jumped into the wiktyka and, sitting on Mr. Berbelek's left side, hit victims on the back with the bamboo staff. He shouted something in Pahlavi. They moved south, turning onto the Beleutian Road. The sun was shining in their eyes. Hieronim pulled his hood deeper.

"As I hear" he continued in Ock "it's already taking off on its own. The nimrods arrived, more and more famous, tempted by rumors of beast hunts the likes of which the world has never seen, they go south, and bored aristocrats join them, paying handsomely, because where can there be greater hunting than in the Anthos of such great hunters? So every season, expedition after expedition begins, the jurjas, as they are called here, it is no longer appropriate to take part at least once, the social form spreads over the city, the country, the first songs and plays are created. They know it's a form, but they want to give in to it. Will you go? Just announce that you're going and you'll also have a list of people willing to go.“

"You, Esthlos? Aren't you going? Oh, of course, if you get it here..."

Is that what he says about his victims? —thought Hieronim. Standing with a smoking keraunet over bloody corpses. “I got her."

"Why don't you do it yourself?" he muttered "since you obviously care about her so much?"

The nimrod turned his blue gaze on Mr. Berbelek. Did he even see his face in the shadow of the hood? The bamboo staff was tapping against the side of the wiktyka.

"Is this what you want, Esthlos?"

Mr. Berbelek didn't look away and the Persian finally lowered his eyes.

"It's mine" said Mr. Berbelek.

"The sky heard, the earth heard" the nimrod nodded humbly.

Mr. Berbelek counted his heartbeats. Twenty-four, twenty-five, good. Once you sit on your hand — why not tame this hawk?

"Now tell me, he didn't say something."

Ihmet stared at the tip of the stick bouncing in rhythm with the rotation of the tall wheels of the wiktyka.

"Ardjer, 81', Thor's Hand. You only had one hundredth. I haven't seen them in years, but that doesn't mean I don't care about their fate, you should understand that, Esthlos. My brother, his whole family. They would be dead. You moved the last inhabitant out; and you shouldn't have, the ships went down, the Baltic was Thor's. You saved everyone. Now that the Warlock is reaching for you... How could I stand idly by? Esthlos."

Amazing, Hieronim was amazed, mechanically straightening the folds of his kirouffa. For the thousands of mortal enemies that man has made by burning cities and slaughtering armies, for these tens of thousands — you actually make a friend or two in the process...!

Meanwhile, the wiktyka entered the Beleutan Bridge, which crosses Lake Mareot diagonally. Here lay the Inner Harbor, modernized during the previous Hypatia, when the channels connecting the lake with the Nile and the Mediterranean Sea were once again widened and deepened. Mareot had always been a salt lake, but now it was actually an additional sea bay. Alexandria expanded around it, on it, and above it. From the bridge they saw the first aerogarons, palaces suspended over the waters of the Mareot, built on the eastern shore, where by law only aristocrats' boats could sail. Farad immediately explained which aerogaron belonged to whom and who was currently losing in this archi-

tectural race. On the right side, however, there were stone commercial wharves in a broken line, moored here by feluccas and galleys, sea ships and ocean liners, a veritable multitude of masts, cranes, and rigging. Farad showed Hieronim the warehouses of the African Company, huge silos and bakhauses.

They drove off the bridge into the streets of Upper Alexandria. There was no talk of ancient buildings, thousand-year-old temples and walls dating back to the times of the First Kratistos. The brick buildings rose to seven, ten, and fifteen floors, often connecting to each other above the streets, which on the one hand guaranteed blessed shade to passers-by, and on the other — one had the impression that one was entering one large building, a dirty maze of gigantic corridors where one could only get lost. In this almost closed space, the cacophony of human and animal voices, exotic music and equally exotic singing was almost deafening. Mr. Berbelek raised his head. The sky flashed above him in the irregular gaps between the walkways connecting the terraces. There, on the upper floors and on the flat roofs of these houses, a second, parallel life was taking place under the sun of Nebuchadnezzar: pedestrians, stallions, camels, zebras, humyas, horses, mules, goats, stalls and vendors, shops and workshops. Only flies, mosquitoes and mosquitoes swirled in the same way in the sun and shade. With an impatient movement, Mr. Berbelek brushed the intrusive insects off his face; They came right back.

From an unseen minaret, the muezzin was singing the azan for afternoon prayer.

They turned around so many times that when they finally stopped, Hieronim had difficulty even orienting himself according to the cardinal directions. Zajdar jumped down first, opened the door without knocking and went inside. The house was located in a dark, dead end, the house had bars on the windows and fresh lime on the walls. Mr. Berbelek inhaled through his nose and regretted doing so: it smelled terrible. There was a sign above the door, but the inscription did not have a Greek version.

"Demiurgos Harshin, son of Zebedee, son of Kodji, taxodermist" Farad read. The title of demiurgos on the sign meant nothing: every second craftsman almost proclaimed himself a teknites.

They went inside.

"Gods" Farad sighed, looking around the room and holding his nose.

Despite the numerous windows, more light came from the lamps placed high under the ceiling; the windows were covered with piles of animal carcasses, dressed and raw skins, skeletons and individual bones, transparent and opaque jars with body fragments preserved in them, and even more mysterious boxes and closed boxes. It was piled up in heaps under all the walls, probably once placed on shelves; maybe there was some order hidden there on the shelves, because the eye saw only chaos.

Mr. Berbelek walked towards the center of the room, where the unfinished works of the master taxodermist were presented in all their hideous glory on parallel tables. Further on, in the passage to the rooms at the back, there were finished works of art. In total, there were over a hundred dead eyes staring at Hieronim at that moment — and what about those animals that have no eyes and those that still have dry eye sockets...? Mr. Berbelek carefully touched the open mouth that was stretched in a predator's leap.

"What is this? A hyena?"

"Aaah, no, no, Esthlos" a hunchbacked old man from a half-black morph trotted over to Mr. Berbelek, interrupting his whispered conversation with Zajdar. "This is a special order, a challenge for a demiurgos." Smiling, he patted the predator on its bare, that is, skinless, back. "There are no such creatures, I create them, I assemble them from dead parts."

Throwing off his white hood, Mr. Berbelek looked around the room.

"So how do you know which animals are real? I don't know much about the local fauna. Like - it's going to be a bird, right?

"Aaaah, Esthlos, that's the question, that's the question!" Harshin began to nod his bald head vigorously, tugging at his thin gray beard. Hieronim now noticed that the taxodermist's left eye was covered with endosperm, and his body was distorted not only by his hump: partial paralysis struck his left arm, raising his elbow at an unnatural angle. What is the nature of this man's madness? Even while living in Nebuchadnezzar's kalokagathic crown, he underwent similar deformations... At least his Greek remains crystal clear."

"A question on which I stopped trying to answer many years ago, before I could even try to achieve perfection in my technique. Which animals look "real", which ones we can believe in, and which ones could never exist? Behind

the simplicity of every beauty there is a great philosophy that must be reached, as the sophistae did, through painstaking thought. It was here, in Alexandria, that the first human dissections and vivisections were carried out; the tradition is long and rich. Do you think, Esthlos, that taxodermy is just a primitive technique for beautifying carrion? Ha!"

Harshin wandered off to the corner for a moment, where he dug out a leather-bound book from under the pile of garbage. Mr. Berbelek took advantage of this pause to give Ihmet a questioning look.

The Persian shrugged. The hunchback pushed the book under Hieronim's nose. *Peri fizeos. Katharmoi*, Mr. Berbelek read.

"Empedokles of Akragas!" shouted the taxodermist, like a priest starting an invocation. "Not Alexander, but he was the first true kratistos! He raised the dead, ruled the winds, his aura burned away diseases in entire lands, no one could remain unconvinced when they listened to his words. Verily, he was among them as an immortal god, and not as a mortal man. They called him a sorcerer. Ha! He entered a volcano, but the pyr turned out to be weaker than his morph, the flames were unable to destroy his body. Empedokles of Akragas, a century before Aristotle, learned the laws of nature, the four elements, the four roots, rhizomata, and philia, and neikos, constantly connecting and separating them, eternal confusion and striving from shape to shape, from composition to composition, and in between, what is dead and what is alive. Here's what he said: 'In the beginning there was no Form or Purpose, only a mixture of everything with everything, free chaos: only heads, only hands, only horns, only fingers, only hair, only hooves. Then all possible and impossible combinations were created: a bear with dragonfly wings, three heads and no body, a leg and an ear, horned snakes, hands with gills, birds with tiger heads, muscles without stomachs, muscles without veins, muscles without bones, bodies without end and beginning. But most of these creatures were unable to survive, or could survive somehow, but others did better and wiped out the others. So that only the bravest or those with the most useful organs remained. By reproducing, they passed on their Form to their descendants.' So what is a taxodermist to do, who stands over this cold chaos of the body and chooses, like God, the shape of a new, unknown perfection? I have to see the entire prehistory of this animal in my head, see how it lives, how it hunts, what enemies it has, how it reproduces, and if it can cope with all of this, a sign that it is true enough. Even the smallest teknitoi of flora or fauna do not have to do this when he breeds

new species, bending the potency of unborn, undeveloped plants and animals to his Form, devouring them with his aura, attracting them to himself a little from generation to generation — he knows that whatever is born will be more perfect, after all he is not able to shape the impossible. Yes, Yes — with great difficulty I find the possible in the flood of the impossible. It requires a specific way of thinking; thought can also become contaminated. But ask anyone in Alexandria: there is none better than Harshin, Son of Zebedee!" He bared the remnants of his crooked teeth at Mr. Berbelek. With his free hand, he continued to pat the fake dog's back. "You believed in him, didn't you, Esthlos? He is as real as a hyena. I call it a roipus."

"Hmmm, indeed, I thought it was some unknown animal. Mr. Zajdar —

"Oh, yes, yes, I already lead!"

The old man threw the book against the wall and motioned for the guests to follow him. Without looking back, he trotted along the narrow, dark corridor to the back of the workshop. He didn't stop talking.

"So I faced the same problem, but now the solution is no longer in my hands, it's not my decision, they bring it to me and demand immortalization in the truest form, as it lived, but I don't know how it could live, what was the true form of it, what was his life possible, I try to see in his head his ancestors, the history, but it is impossible, impossible, there is no such form, it is falling apart — as Empedokles says: heads without bodies, eyes without heads, pupils without eyes. Maybe it's true that they changed beyond recognition during the journey north, that they shouldn't have taken them to the heart of Nebuchadnezzar's anthos, but he would rather straighten them out and heal them posthumously, although it doesn't make sense anyway, the anthos doesn't have any kratistos that strong, that's not what it's about, I don't know what it's about, I can't, it's impossible."

Muttering thus, he opened the side door and they entered the second workshop. There were three animal carcasses in various stages of decomposition on three separate tables, covered with wire scaffolding.

This is what Mr. Berbelek thought at first when he looked at them, because he was directed from above by the words of Zajdar and Harshin to the animal forms; but after the third heartbeat came a reflection: what animals, these are not, were not animals. He didn't know what it could be.

On his left was a dark bush of tangled veins and tendons, no blood, no bones, a chaos of internal organs disemboweled in the yellow light. — but what organs were they, what body were they wrapped in, what shape? No bottom, no top, no back, no sides, no head, no tail, just a tight tangle of black arteries and gray ligaments, connecting no parts of the body, ending and beginning in the void.

On the table in front of Mr. Berbelek, hanging between wires, as red as a baby's blood, was the skeleton of a giant butterfly. Of course, butterflies do not have bones. But the eye sees, the mind names. If only this "butterfly" had a head — but it didn't have one, it was crowned on both sides with transparent balloons made of a taut membrane, half of which were filled with some oily goo. The left wing of the "butterfly", or rather the bones of the left wing — were twice the size of the right wing bone.

On the table to the right, wires held together the skinned limbs of a great ape, its limbs and head. The torso was missing.

"They say that's what she looked like." replied the taxidermist to Mr. Berbelek's questioning look. "That there was only green mist inside. From this fog — paws, legs... Apparently it condensed and evaporated as they returned to Alexandria. What am I supposed to do with it?" The demiurgos spread his arms helplessly, and his left elbow jumped higher than his shoulder.

Ihmer Zajdar approached the helpless man and slowly dragged his fingernail across the balloon of slimy membrane.

"Well, their bullets harmed it" he muttered.

Then he smiled crookedly at Mr. Berbelek, as if he had already been completely freed from his Form.

"So Now? Won't you hunt, Esthlos?"

THE next day, on Dies Lunae, Aprilis 28th, Mr. Berbelek went to the Alexandria Library. He dismissed Farad in the morning. No one saw Hieronim take out a worn-out book with black covers from under the false bottom of his traveling trunk and hide it in the deep pocket of his kirouffa.

The museum, founded by Alexander on his sixtieth birthday on the model of

the Athenian Lyceum of his teacher and second father, Aristotle, originally consisted of shrines dedicated to the Muses (over time transformed into temples of various deities), gardens where lectures were held under the open sky (over time absorbed by Parethene Gardens), the bestiary (also absorbed by the Gardens) and the library founded by Aristotle himself. The library, also financed from the government treasury, did not focus on physical investigations and the search for Sophia and proved most useful to the bureaucratic center of the Alexandrian Empire, which the city quickly became. It soon became independent, expanding beyond any of its creator's intentions. Currently, after nearly two thousand years of continuous collecting, copying, translating and archiving books and all other material carriers of human thought, the Great Library in Alexandria itself occupied over twenty buildings, housing several hundred million volumes; Moreover, there were numerous branches of the Library in the countries of the former Empire. Only the Library of Pergamon during the times of the Seleucidites power could compare with it.

For a man on the street who wanted to take advantage of this treasure trove of knowledge, the right way was through the Serapeum. The Temple of Serapis was the first to be annexed by the growing Library. It was still a place of worship for the god of fertility and death — although here the Canopic temple, famous for numerous healings, had priority — but above all, it served as a public entrance to the Library. Over the centuries, librarians and priests have developed a code of peaceful coexistence with which both sides were satisfied.

Mr. Berbelek's wiktyka crossed the bridge over Lake Mareot, turned left from the Beleutian Road and, getting stuck in the traffic, stopped in the middle of the southwestern quarter of Old Alexandria. Hieronim paid the driver and then, putting his hood over his head, blended in with the flow of passers-by. Following Zajdar's example, he purchased a bamboo stick, the so-called rykte — it was mainly used to stab other passers-by in the ribs and bruise their calves, or to protect themselves from other people's beatings. Aristocrats, as a rule, never moved around the city on foot or without the company of servants.

He couldn't miss the Serapeum, he had already seen it from afar. It wasn't even the fact that the building itself was tall — and it was — but it stood on a huge platform raised above the city. Mr. Berbelek counted the steps of the grand staircase as he climbed. One hundred and sixty-three. In the center of the platform stood a sanctuary surrounded by a marble colonnade. There were no doors or guards, at least Hieronim didn't see them; anyone could

enter. Beyond the colonnade, behind a shadowy vestibule with a shining ceiling mosaic depicting the Sun, opened the Great Hall of the temple, with a statue of Serapis in the center. It was not the original statue by Briaxis, commissioned by Alexander personally — that one was destroyed during the Second Pythagorean Uprising. It was replaced by a figure transferred from the Canopic Serapeum. The bearded god sat with his arms spread wide — a two-headed dog crouched under one, and a massive skeptron leaned against the other — and he was so huge that his hands touched the walls on both sides. The walls were covered with ornaments of gold, silver and bronze; the god himself was made of gold, silver, lead, rubies and tin, sapphires, hematites, emeralds and topaz. High in one of the walls was a small window that was opened on the day of the celebration, when the Living Sun was brought into the sanctuary; a narrow ray of sunlight would then fall through this window and lay a bright kiss on the god's lips. The Living Sun itself was lifted to the level of his mouth — there it hung in the air, between the god's open hands. As they passed in front of the temple yesterday, Farad helpfully explained to Mr. Berbelek that powerful magnets were built into Serapis' hands. Hieronim regretted that he would no longer be able to see the celebration in ignorance, how all gods should be worshiped.

Behind the statue, on both sides, doors opened leading to the side aisles and further into the basement, a constantly enlarging labyrinth of warehouses reaching to the main building of the Library. Under Serapis' right arm was a table of offerings for the temple, under his left —a donation table for the Library. The donations were, of course, voluntary and their amount was arbitrary, but Farad, in his unstoppable flow of words, managed to explain this tradition to Mr. Berbelek as well.

Hieronim turned to the right, reached into the inside pocket of his kirouffa and placed five talents of grain on the table. The Library Clerk looked up from the donation book.

Mr. Berbelek rested his hand with the family ring on his ring finger on the edge of the table.

"Esthlos Hieronim Berbelek-z-Ostrog seeks wisdom in the temple of the Muses" he said in Greek

The clerk nodded to one of the naked slaves crouched next to him against the wall. The slave jumped towards him; the clerk whispered something in his ear. The doulos walked quickly away into the side aisle.

"Please rest, Esthlos."

Mr. Berbelek sat down on the marble bench behind Serapis. He rested his hands on the table and the rykte resting on the floor between his feet. His face was covered by a white hood; the iron locust ring was the only visible sign of identity.

"Esthlos?"

He raised his head. The librarian in question was undoubtedly a native of Alexandria, judging by her copper skin, classically shaped breasts, black hair and straight, narrow nose. The long skirt was fastened high at the waist with a buckle with the Gem of the Library.

She led him to the eastern aisle, where they sat down at one of the low marble counters stacked with books. Two librarians were working at the back of the room, talking quietly over spread-out papers. Everywhere was a sanctuary of shade, coolness and silence; the lamps gave just enough light to read.

The librarian offered Hieronim a honey drink from a bowl filled with fruit. He thanked her.

"Berenice" she introduced herself. "How can I help you?"

He took out the book. Berenice held out her hand. After a barely noticeable moment of hesitation, he handed her the black volume.

She opened it, turned a few pages and looked questioningly at Mr. Berbelek.

"A Greek, Ock, Gaelic, Vistul, Gothic, Muscovite or Latin translation. Do you have any of them? You must have."

Berenice thoughtfully placed the closed book on her lap — dirty black on soft white — she clasped her hands on it — now he noticed that she was wearing identical wedding rings on her thumbs — and she bowed her head slightly. They both hid their faces: her — behind the curtain of hair, he — in the shadow of the hood.

"I would like to know how you came into possession of it, Esthlos."

"Do you have these translations or not?"

"Oh, we definitely do."

"So?"

"How?" she repeated. "Esthlos?"

"What is it about? Is this some kind of rare specimen?"

"You really do not know"

"Would I come here and ask"

"Of course. Of course." She was silent for a moment. "Actually, I should report this to my superiors."

"About what in the name of God? At least tell me what book it is. What is this language. What is written in it. You know."

"I know, I know, we know such books."

The way she said it — the intonation with which the word "such" left her lips — opened a path of quick associations in Hieronim's head. The Library of Alexandria is a theoretically independent institution, but it is located in the land of the Hypatia, in Nebuchadnezzar's anthos. Berenice, being a native Alexandrian, carries within herself all the benefits and curses of this Form.

Mr. Berbelek took off his hood. Turning to the woman, he lightly grabbed her arm. She flinched.

"Can you tell me" he said. "You should."

She nodded reflexively.

"*Our Lady's Light*, probably from the first printing" she started quickly. "In the language of the Labyrinth, one of the temple scripts of Kaphtor, unused for millennia. When lunar cults emerged after the Fifth Kratistos War and the Exile of Illeia Collotropia, they adopted those traditions and treated this newly completed language as a kind of cypher. Writings and books began to circulate throughout Europe and Alexandrian Africa. Immediately after the Exile, the Kratistoi remained particularly sensitive, they put pressure on the rulers, all captured followers of the Lady were sentenced to death. Several hundred years have passed, but a similar book still constitutes incriminating evidence against

the anthos of most of the kratistoi; Here too, under Nebuchadnezzar's anthos; especially here. You must know, Esthlos: Potnia once ruled these lands, from the Pyrenees to Sadara and Auxum. We have these titles in the Library because we have them all, but they are not borrowed and no one from outside has access to them."

Cursed Magdalena Leese, thought Mr. Berbelek. That's all I needed. If Shulima is also involved in this...

He squeezed Berenice's arm; after all, she has already submitted to him, she won't refuse now.

"Give it back."

But she jumped up, freed herself from the grip, stepped away from the table. She clutched the book to her chest (dirty black on light brown).

"I think... I think you need to go now, Esthlos."

That's it for the return of the great strategos, Hieronim sighed inwardly, pulling his hood back over his head. Any librarian — already scared, and yet she easily escapes from my hand. After all, even if I was in the scaled morph of a strategos, I wouldn't slit her throat, it wasn't an order, she never swore an oath to me. You are not a kratistos, Hieronim, neither a king nor an aristocrat of pure Form. Abel's childish imaginations invade your mind. The Warlock ate your heart, forget about that life.

He left the Serapeum and entered the sunny square. From the height of one hundred and sixty-three steps he could see all of Old Alexandria, all the way to the temple of Isis and the Great Lantern on the island of Pharos. The sky was cloudless, an immaculate blue, from which purifying brightness flows. In a few heartbeats, Hieronim's mood completely changed. Despite everything — he thought, inhaling the sea breeze — after all, Ihmet was right: long days, warm nights, light in the air, people more beautiful, healthier, spices more spicy, wines more bitter; this is how you can convince yourself of life and joy of life, this is a noble form. A thousand blessings to Nebuchadnezzar the Golden! I will not give up. I can always at least spit in her face, right?

Mr. Berbelek laughed out loud as he stepped down from the temple platform.

THEY separated at Hesiod's Fountain. Alithea was convinced that he was going to visit a Roman brothel, she read his mood correctly, but Abel was excited about something completely different. Yesterday, after supper, he talked to Zeno, Esthle Lotte's son from her first marriage. The slaves kept pouring wine, the conversation meandered to wherever the first associations led — circus Aberrato K'Ire, the black olympics, Roman gladiators — and then Zeno spoke about this place and revealed his scar, hidden from his mother and the family's body teknites: a narrow, pale gash on his hip. "Every young man from a good home has at least one" Zenon assured. "It's fashionable now. Everyone goes. It is not appropriate to avoid it. The Parethene Gardens, of course, Dies Martis, an hour after dusk, but you have to be there earlier. Garden Twenty-two. On bond. One scar, one bond. You want one?"

What a question! The form did not allow for refusal, only a coward would refuse — no wonder "everyone goes". But he really wanted to. Although maybe it was the Form that made him want to. From living room to living room, from neighborhood to neighborhood, wherever two or more well-born young men meet, it only takes one to impose it consciously, involuntarily — it will win, impossible to reverse, they will carry it further... As he thought about it now, as he entered the Gardens, looked back once at the evening city, Alexandria from horizon to horizon, from sky to sky, the image of that invisible fist closing on the capital of Aegypt and squeezing from it the freshest, the most vivid juices directly into the fertile soil of the Parethene Gardens, every week, on Dies Marsi, one hour after dusk. If there are any, it is only such gods, Abel said to himself. This is how we make offerings to them: eagerly, willingly, of your own free will. Because I know it's a Form, but I want to surrender to it. If I hadn't come here, I wouldn't have been able to look them in the face: Zeno, others who would know that I refused. Shame is not governed by reason. Shame is born from constantly comparing ourselves with the image of a person we would like to be. In the same way, the father should have punished this murderer on *Al-Hawidzah*; shame on him for letting it get away. I know how I can't help but behave. He was unconsciously stroking the handle of the Gothic kanjar hidden under the kirouffa all the time.

The Sacred Gardens of Parethene were founded under the aura of Kratista Illeia, before the Kratistos Wars. It is said that all the best ge and flora teknitoi are women, and their works go down in history. The creator of the Gardens was Mary of Anatolia, the Black Dove, the one who grew the milk palm and the sand wheat, the serb and the zerbigo. It transformed this piece of Egyptian

land in such a way that each plant was now able to impose its own Form on it. — the most exotic specimens from the most distant corners of the Earth grew here in conditions similar to those in their country of origin. (Already during Nebuchadnezzar's time, parts of the Gardens were enclosed in panels of Vodenburg glass to provide additional insulation). To this day, sophistae have argued about what the Black Dove's morph actually was, what it did to the keros here.

The Parethene Gardens were open to guests 24 hours a day, the fee was twenty drachmas. Abel paid and entered. From the Parethene shrine standing behind the gate, the alley forked, with branches running in opposite directions around the perimeter. Within this district there were enclosed gardens, usually under the patronage of a temple or tall houses; outside — open gardens, under the patronage of the Hypatia. The Twenty-Second Garden was an inner garden, recorded by the Ptolemies.

It was already dusk and the slaves were lighting their lamps. Only the peripheral avenue was illuminated, the interiors of the gardens were quickly plunged into twilight, woven with millions of moving shadows. As he passed the shrine, Abel looked over the iron fence — from the northern gardens you can clearly see the sea, the Great Bay and the Pharos, the reflected light of the lanterns breaks through the thicket even here. But Abel turned south.

At this time of night, the Gardens were mostly visited by lovers seeking solitude; The twenty-drachma entry fee was, among other things, intended to discourage street whores from using them. The Indian Garden, The Hatata Garden, and The Antipodean Garden — these were the most popular. Few visited the Ice Garden and The Sadara Garden.

Abel passed the first corner. At each branch there was a small statuette of Parethene, the character of a given garden could be recognized by the attribute she held. Zenon told Abel to turn at the Parethene with the dragon at her feet.

But he did not tell him that it was only the second garden of the southern avenue, and Abel, startled, stopped at the sight of a stone figure of a woman and a monster. His hand gripped the sweat-soaked handle of the kanjar. He licked his lips and looked around — no one was passing by, anyway, what does it matter if someone sees him, that's the point, everyone should see Abel Latek, Abel Berbelek with this kanjar —

Something could have happened to me, I could have gotten lost, my father could have caught me and forbade me, I don't have to go there, I'll make an excuse somehow, they'll believe me — he knew they wouldn't believe it — after all, just a stone under the foot, just a trip at the wrong moment, an accident, a stab between the ribs, the doctor won't make it in time, it happens, Zeno said it happened — but chance has no influence on Form, could Alexander the Great have died by falling off his horse? — if I come back now and no one has seen me, so no one will know that —

He left the statuette far behind him, it was already at the garden door, the steel emblem of the Ptolemies —an eagle on lightning — it glowed in the twilight. It opened before he knocked. Zenon was waiting by the doorman, ready to vouch for him.

"Come in, come in, they started earlier!"

He was given tobacco. Abel inhaled deeply. He held the cigarette in his left hand; he looked — he didn't tremble. He smiled crookedly.

"All right; I hoped I wouldn't have to wait."

The Land of Dragons, South Herdon was apparently covered with gigantic trees with trunks like towers, their tall crowns completely blocking the darkening sky. Paper lanterns and the echo of group shouts showed the way. They followed a slave carrying a large amphora on his shoulder. Zenon hurried Abel, and immediately they overtook the doulos. "Come on, at least let me see how it ends!" Garlands of dark purple vines with slightly phosphorescent red flowers hung from the branches of gigantic trees. Entering the clearing, Zenon threw his cigarette butt into one of their cups. The flower immediately clenched into a purple fist.

Nearly a hundred people gathered in the clearing, boys and girls, probably no one older than twenty-five; in the monomorphic perfection of their bodies, additionally idealized by generously paid teknitoi, similar to each other like brothers and sisters, all aristocrats or descendants of families aspiring to aristocracy, the future elite of Alexandria, The Children of Nebuchadnezzar. They laughed, chanted curses, insults and encouragements, drank dark wine from crystal goblets, and smoked sweet hashish in Persian pipes. Some of them were sitting on the grass among the spreading roots of dragon trees, a few couples were immersed in caresses and had stopped paying attention to their surround-

ings. — but most stood in a wide circle around the center of the clearing, where one nude boy with a knife in his hand was chasing another nude boy with a knife. A ring of red lanterns hung above their heads.

Zenon and Abel pushed their way to the front row. On the way, Zenon grabbed a goblet of wine from a passing doulos.

"Ha! I knew it! Mouse heart!" Spitting in disgust, he stretched out his hand towards the fleeing knifeman with his fingers straight in the Reverse Horns gesture.

Abel noticed that others were making the same gesture. Voices cursed Gaius' cowardice and urged Axyndra to finally get the other one. Abel desperately inhaled the tobacco smoke, but it didn't help either.

The opponents were chasing each other in a circle, they must have been running for a long time, they were jogging rather than running, Axynder was screaming at Gaius, brandishing a knife, red in the face, Gaius was looking over his shoulder. None of them were even scratched. At one point, Gaius staggered and hit one of the spectators; he pushed him away and Gaius fell over, falling on his back. Axynder jumped towards him — now he's going to kill him, Abel thought — Gaius threw away the knife and Axynder placed his foot on his chest. They were both breathing heavily.

The crowd began chanting one word: "Tribute! Tribute! Tribute!" The shape of the situation was so strong that Abel didn't even realize it, and he himself started shouting this demand, the moment must come to an end, this is obvious: "Tribute! Tribute!"

Axynder brought his dirty foot to the defeated man's mouth. Gaius couldn't even hesitate anymore. With his eyes closed, he raised his head and kissed the victor's foot.

"Axynder! Axynder! Axynder!" the crowd chanted, Abel with them. Two girls ran up to Axynder, they started hugging and kissing himssw, Axynder, radiant with triumph, raised the clean blade up like some kind of trophy; someone handed him a cup of wine, he poured it on his head. Everyone laughed.

Gaius crawled away from the red lanterns;

"Alright" Zenon muttered and handed the empty cup back to Abel. "Her-

man is here. Until they fall apart."

Before Abel realized the meaning of his words, the son of Esthle Laetitia Lotte stepped into the middle of the clearing and clapped three times.

"Now!" he shouted. "Ladies and gentlemen! Now! Because the evening has only just begun! Don't go! Now! The esteemed Esthlos Herman of Meretep! Son of Admos! Thousand-year-old blood! Great-grandson of the Slayer of Rhodes! Nighteen years old! The third challenger! Four scars! Respect! Now!" Herman stepped out of the circle into the middle of the clearing, wearing white a shalwar, he quickly took them off; someone threw him a knife, Herman caught it from the air. Zenon turned to Abel. "Now! Now! Respects to Esthlos Abel of Berbelek! Hieronim's son! Hieronim Berbelek! Yes! The Strategist of Europe! The Victor of Umita! The Victor of Finas! The Conqueror of the Dog of Grodu! The Lightning Bolt of Vistulia! The Warlock's Shame! Yes! The son of Hieronim Berbelek! Sixteen years old! First challenge! Respect! Now! Here! Now!"

With each shout of his father's honor, Abel felt more and more certain that he would lose, that he must lose, that victory was impossible. Slowly and calmly, as if in a trance — the certainty was so great — he took off his kirouffa and shalwar, unbuttoned his sandals, and took out his Gothic kanjar from its sheath. He stared for a moment at the black, curved blade of purine steel. The cobra handle was wet with sweat, and he wiped his hand on his thigh. Zenon, returning to the line of spectators, slapped Abel on the back. Abel looked up. He didn't hear anything, they were already chanting something, but he didn't hear, the red light took away his hearing. Herman was walking towards him, half a pous taller, with a knife clutched in a strange grip at chest level. He trained, Abel thought, he has already fought, he can. I was just playing with the dagger. I have no right to win. I should have dropped my weapon and fallen to the ground and kissed his feet. Otherwise he'll cut me. Nobility!

He imagined it: him kneeling and kissing his feet. The blood rushed to his head. He grinned. Respect to Esthlos Abel Berbelek! Hieronim's son! He jumped at Herman. The boy blinked, raised the knife, lowered it at the last moment, stepped back, turned around and began to run away. Abel was always fast, he outperformed all his peers in the gymnasium. In ten leaps he reached Hermann, slashed him across the back, across the thigh, across the shoulder, across the back; he grabbed him by the hair and yanked him, stopping him in place, then stabbed his kanjar into his right buttock.

Herman fell. Zenon dragged the panting Abel away. Doctors, demiurgoi of flesh and blood, were already bending over the defeated man. Abel looked away in surprise.

A tall aristocrat with diamond rings and a colorful tattoo around her neck gave Abel a large cup full of wine. She smiled broadly. Abel, in a move as natural as wiping sweat from his brow, pulled her to him and kissed her, greedily eating the breath from between her lips.

Zenon tugged on his arm and raised his right hand, still clenched into a fist, above his head. Everyone was already chanting, it was obvious:

"Abel! Abel! Abel! Abel! Abel!"

THE first thing Esthle Laetitia Lotte did when she returned to Alexandria was to organize a small party. She did not greet Amitace very warmly; the idea was that the Alexandrian aristocracy could greet Laetitia. The reception was to be, in Lotte's words, "quite modest." She invited just over a hundred guests. On the evening of the third of Maius, at the hour of the Kneeling Sun — as the edge of the sun's disk touches the golden statue of Alexander — the palace gates opened.

Esthle Lotte's hospitality, however great, had its limits, and it was never customary to refund guests' purchases, and Mr. Berbelek had to pay for clothes for himself and his children from his own pocket. Nevertheless, he raised an eyebrow when he saw the bill presented by the Median tailor and Lotte's Babylonian jeweler: ninety percent of the amount due for Alithea's outfits. He paid, of course, without argument; nevertheless, at the first opportunity he questioned Porte and Anton about the rumors circulating among the servants and slaves (the most reliable source of information in every home) and it turned out what Hieronim actually expected: Alithea spent most of her time with Esthle Amitace, in the palace or in the city, in exclusive baths and some body shops, and she also made purchases in the company of Shulima. She's morphing her in front of me, Mr. Berbelek was internally irritated. Now, when Alithea is at her most vulnerable, Amitace shapes her future. How can I prevent this? I can't; I would have to break my own daughter's Form, I would have to bind her will. When did it start on the *Al-Hawidzah*? Was it during the meeting at the circus? Because it's true that parents are never their children's closest friends;

this role always falls to strangers when children are looking for a way to break free from the mold of their father or mother — and fall headlong into opposite forms. Except in Abel's case, I'm the stranger. Alithea — Alithea found herself a Big Sister.

But when he saw her that evening in the great atrium of the palace, next to her the cousin of the Hypatia, greeting the newly arrived guests, in one of those outfits for which he had paid a small fortune — all the anger evaporated from him and he calmly admitted that he lost here to Shulima and in fact he was not even angry about it. He saw a beautiful woman, a proud aristocrat. During these few days, Amitace managed to transform Alithea into an Alexandrian, even her skin miraculously began to take on that coppery shade, the color of "Nebuchadnezzar's gold". Black curls fell down her back in carefully coiffed waves, up to an equally black, wide belt, stitched with silver threads, from underneath flowed the snow-white silk of a long skirt, cut almost to the knee, in the slit the golden straps of high sandals flashed, going several times around the slender calf; this leg was slightly extended. Alithea stood straight, head tilted back, chin up, shoulders back, breasts — admittedly still far from the Nebuchadnezzar morph — facing forward, the silver necklace descended between them with an icicle of cold metal, half hidden behind the horizon The sun made sharp flashes of light on it as Alithea raised her right hand, turning her palm so that greeting aristocrats could kiss the inside of her wrist in bowing, and high aristocrats of Aegypt indeed bowed, gave formal kisses, she rewarded them with a nod and the movement of a black fan made from the wing of a basilisk, held in her right hand, with lightness and confidentiality truly worthy of Esthle Amitace, open, fold, open, flutter, fold, touch the guest's shoulder — even when they left and mingled with the others, they looked at Alithea, exchanged comments in hushed tones, tried to catch her eye. She pretended not to notice.

On Esthle Lotte's right hand stood her sons with Esthle Amitace and Esthlos Kamal, Laetitia's half-brother. This place was supposed to be occupied by Esthlos Berbelek, but he excused himself due to business reasons. What's worse, the excuse was true: according to the information received from Aneis Panatakis, he accepted the invitation and Esthlos Qethar Anujabar, one of the two main shareholders of the African Company, appeared in the palace of Esthle Lotte. Without waiting for a formal introduction, he approached Hieronim and initiated a conversation. Of course he was much taller than him; a black, muscular torso peeked out from under the unbuttoned kartiba (Anujabar lived most of the year in the Anthos of Meuzulek, in the fortress of Sala on the west coast

of Africa), his face was framed by a squarely trimmed beard, his thick lips were constantly curled with a brazenly sincere smile. Given Berbelek's taciturn nature, he easily imposed a Form of conversation. He pointed to individual guests with a glass of absinthe and, in a low voice, told Hieronim the funniest gossip about them; sometimes these rumors turned out to actually be the allusive comments on trade proposals made in Kristoff Njute's letters. Mr. Berbelek listened with curiosity. Esthle Lotte seemed to know everyone who was worth knowing in Alexandria.

"Esthle Marta Odijja, Second Confidant of Gemm, actually controls the Hypatia's office, shared her last two lovers with the Hypatia; she once went berserk and strangled several of her slave girls. Oh, this is Isidore the Ox, smile at him, Esthlos, these two are his security, former soldiers of The Horror, it's strange that he came at all, so that you could see what fortress he lives in; it used to have almost a monopoly on trade with the Golden Kingdoms, recently it has broken down, fierce competition, three attacks already, maybe more. Uprak Indus, not the one on the left, the one next to the Roman woman with the ruby in her chest, Uprak inherited the Chimera's madness, he is pushing the project of a dam on the Nile, he has already sunk half his fortune into it, the Hypatia and Nebuchadnezzar will of course never agree, but, by Kristos, they will not tell him that, ha ha! Oh, our slant-eyed diplomat appeared, Uzo, a man of the Niponese emperor, he rarely visits the city, he stays on the border of the Golden Crown. Very popular at court, he gives exorbitant bribes. If only I knew for what purpose. Behind the japress flowers, under the umbrella — the Ishepe sisters of the Ptolemies. Azi and Trez, but you can't tell which is which: they live together, they married the same man, a teknites removed all the differences in their bodies, they don't seem to distinguish themselves, one morph. Oh, this young man who can't tear himself away from your daughter's hand — Esthlos David Monshebe, of the Second Monshebes, grandson of the Governor of Upper Aegypt, an ares. He wanted to escape to The Horror, his father kept him under guard for half a year. Apparently he gave in; or David swore some oath. Those who are entering now, the Glakians. They had a democrat in the family, a suspicious morph, better stay away. This beauty who is currently greeting Laetitia — Esthle Ignatia of the Ashakanids, they come from India, but for two generations are in the Golden Crown, Ignatia apparently even met the Kratistos in person. On the other side of the pool, in front of the piper — Esthlos Heine Onykos, just returned from a jurja. Yes, you are going on a jurja, aren't you, Esthlos?"

"I was invited."

"So, are you going or not? Talk to him."

Esthlos Anujabar easily convinced the seneschal to seat them at the same table for supper. Esthlos Onykos was indeed immediately asked about his recent hunting expedition.

"This cannot be told" he said finally, muttering and tugging at his beard. "As I remember now... It was all wrong. Meaning — we brought various trophies, but they are no longer the same, it was a completely different Form, They are impossible to keep in Nebuchadnezzar's crown; and it's the same with memories. What can I tell you? That they are monsters? About the monsters. You would have to go and see for yourself."

"How far did you go?" Qethar asked.

"Not very far. Two tenths of the second circle. The north bank of the Turtle River. Lucinda wanted to move on, but nimrods always want to. The Xewras and humyas stopped listening to us, the food tasted terrible, stones were crawling under the animals' skin at night, one of the slaves started shitting with his mouth —"

"Ugh, not while eating!" Esthle Ignatia Ashakani grimaced.

"Sorry. Anyway, we decided it was time to go back."

Mr. Berbelek listened in silence.

"Apparently it helps if you drink water from a pashupa" said Esthlos David Monshebe, who was also sitting at this table. Most of the time he swiveled around in his chair to look at Alithea Lotte at the table and paid no attention to the discussion. Hieronim wondered if the young ares even knew that Esthlos Berbelek was the girl's father; maybe she was only portrayed as Alithea Latek.

Esthlos Onykos cleared his throat questioningly.

"A decoction of pashupa" Monshebe explained. "Add it to the animal's water. They're more likely to go. I heard that the wildlings do that. Shamans give pashupa to warriors who go beyond the Dry River."

"There is insanity, known to the ancients" Qethar chimed in, wiping his

mouth. "The body then falls off in pieces, skin, muscles, bones."

"Leprosy — " said a young black woman.

"Well not while eating, not while eating!"

"Please forgive us." Anujabar bowed across the table. But he immediately continued. "Well, I heard a rumor that pashupa in large doses causes leprosy."

"In large doses, even kalokagatia is unhealthy" commented Esthle Ignatia, to which everyone laughed politely; only the undisputedly beautiful can afford such jokes. At least only Hieronim noticed that it was actually a political joke: as she spoke, she looked at the Niponese man, Uzo, sitting at the next table.

After supper, when the guests separated and some went to the dance hall, some watched the performances of actors, acrobats and magoi paid for by Laetitia, some of whom spread around the palace and some went to the garden — Esthlos Anujabar invited Mr. Berbelek for a smoke under the moon. The moon was in the penumbra, cut by light and darkness right between the seas, casting a pink glow on the garden that made everything softer, rounder and slipperier. They sat down on one of the stone benches surrounding the square with the water fountains. Statues of men, women and fantastic cacomorphs, from which water gushed from various angles, were made according to the canons of Nebuchadnezzar's art. — Hellenic naturalism, uniform proportions, the Aegyptian ideal of beauty — while the palace itself was built in the times of Chimera, then only renovated and adapted to the new customs. Hence, among other things, the atrium open to the front courtyard contributing to the annoying asymmetry of the plan. Berbelek and Anujabar sat on the left side of the square. In front of them, behind curtains of silver drops, they saw the profile of a building illuminated by thousands of lamps and torches; behind their backs — the rustle of invisible palm trees and acacias, and the sound of the waters of the nearby Lake Mareot; and above their heads — a cloudless sky so densely encrusted with stars that it is almost blinding even without the crescent moon. A pair of gampar walked lazily along the alleys.

Doulos brought long pipes made of horus wood, with stone bowls. Qethar selected a mixture from the herbal box, a quarter of hashish. They lit them. Other guests went out to the garden, usually stopping at the fountain complex. Mr. Berbelek noticed Abel surrounded by several younger guests. He had already noticed a change, a shift in the weight of the boy's form, difficult to

capture in a single image. For example now: they position themselves around him so that everyone can see his face, they become silent when he is speaking, they do not interrupt the one he is looking at — older than Abel, of higher birth, men and women. He looks back at the slave passing by — he didn't even have time to extend his hand, someone else handed him a glass from a tray. They laugh when he laughs. There's something behind it, something happened — but in what form could I ask him about it openly? Does such a form even exist?

" 'In shouting we recognize the enemy, in silence — a friend' " quoted Esthlos Anujabar.

" 'The greatest lies are told in silence.' " Mr. Berbelek replied with a quote.

They sat facing the same direction — legs stretched out on the closely cropped grass, pipes resting on their chest — they did not look at each other, the night mediated the dialogue.

" 'Strong people are honest and truthful people, because every lie requires the denial of its morph, and the most perfect liars soon forget who they are.' "

" 'When two liars meet; whose Form will win: a better or worse liar?' "

"Having captured the city, Xerxes ordered all its surviving inhabitants to be beheaded; for they shut their gates against him and resisted him, though they had previously sworn allegiance. Then the defeated ones began to appear, swearing that they wanted to keep their oath, but they could do nothing against the majority. Xerxes asked those who were silent if this was true. They denied it. He ordered everyone to be beheaded. When asked how he knew who was lying, he replied: 'Because I beat them.' "

"'Don't believe a man who has never told a single lie in his life.'"

" 'There is at least one advantage to liars: that when they tell the truth, no one believes them.' "

" 'Whoever lies to a child offends the gods.' "

" 'A truthful child was born into a family of liars. How is this possible? Because the father and mother were liars.' "

“ ’If all children inherited the Form of their parents; there would be no hope for mankind.’ ”

“ ’Who wishes harm to their own child? We would all like to see them better than we had the will to become, and that’s how we raise them; and they — with their own children. In this way, perfection will be achieved in a finite number of generations.’ ”

”Do you have children?”

”Seven.”

”Just these two.”

”They inherited a bright and strong morph. You see that, right?”

”Yes. Yes.”

”That moment when for the first time you realize that you are working not for yourself, not for your own ambitions, but with the thought of what will come after your death.”

”Yes I think so. I haven’t had much ambition lately.

”But you still have some idea of a future in which...No? At least it’s their future.

”Why would I want to provide them with wealth? If they are strong enough, they will get it themselves, right? And the weak — they’ll waste it anyway.”

”So, after all, why should we ever waste our time worrying about storms, sea monsters, shoals, pirates, insidious competition, market whims, fickle prices, dishonest partners, lying partners? — and fight for more and more wealth?”

Mr. Berbelek shrugged and slowly exhaled sweetish smoke from his mouth.

”Why?”

”Because it’s in our nature.” Qethar Anujabar stood up, put down his pipe, smoothed out his kartiba. ”The day after tomorrow at the Company office, at noon. I will present counter-proposals, bring the appropriate documents, you have power of attorney and if you agree, we will sign immediately in the presence

of The Hypatia's witness. Esthlos? — Mr. Berbelek stood up, they clasped hands. "You did me an honor."

Having said this, Anujabar nodded and left.

Hieronim looked around the water fountains square. Abel disappeared somewhere with his friends. Izydor Ox turned into one of the garden alleys with an aristocrat on his arm, two guards following him like shadows. Alithea appeared for a moment on the garden stairs, accompanied by David Monshebe; Mr. Berbelek moved towards them, but before he went around the fountain complex, they hid in the palace again. He bumped into Shulima who was just leaving. Looking back, she waved for her doulos and apparently didn't notice Hieronim. "Oh, it's you, Esthlos!" Before he could apologize, move past her, and hurry after Alithea, Esthle Amitace took him by the arm and pulled him around the bend into the nearest alley.

"We didn't really have a chance to talk calmly" she began, hiding her fan under her corset; the light breeze off the lake was pleasantly cool and damp. Shulima's silver ring shone in the moonlight like —

"Murder! Guards!" shouted a man running across the square. "They're after me!"

Mr. Berbelek freed himself from Shulima's grip. The man reached the first water fountain; it was Izydor Ox. Mr. Berbelek ran to him.

"Guards!" Izydor panted. "Guards!"

A slave appeared on the palace steps, immediately backed away and ran for help. Mr. Berbelek looked back at the mouth of the alley where he saw Izydor emerge. Three figures, bent to the ground, emerged from the gloom.

"Your people?" asked Hieronim.

"They didn't even shoot."

The figures slowly entered the moonlight. The head and claws of a gampar, the rest of a human. A fourth gampanthrope emerged from the shadows. They began to circle the fountains and the men standing by them.

"If we run to the palace, they'll be at our throats." Mr. Berbelek muttered.

Through the curtain of drops falling down the wide gaps, he saw Esthle Amitace, standing calmly on the border between twilight and lunar glow. She caught Hieronim's gaze and shook her head. The movement of blond hair caught the attention of one of the gampanthropes, who immediately turned towards Shulima.

Mr. Berbelek, without turning his head, looked squinting at the palace. Where are those damned guards? Even the greatest strategos cannot do anything without an army. Pressed against the stone of the statue, Izydor prayed aloud.

The gampanthropes began to run towards Shulima. She took a step forward, the ring flashing with the moon's reflection. With her right hand straightened, she pointed to the ground at her feet. The gampanthrope stopped, raised its head, bared its fangs, and then lay down on the grass in front of Amitace. She pulled out a small, curved knife from somewhere. "Sshshshsh!" she hummed, leaning over the sigemorph. It lowered its head. She slit its throat.

The other three gampanthropes, hearing the shriek of their dying brother, stopped in their tracks and turned their cold, animalistic glances at the straightening Shulima. Mr. Berbelek also managed to notice how jet black the blood spilled on Amitace's blue skirt seemed in the moonlight. Someone ran out of the palace. The gampanthropes turned their heads again. Why aren't they still attacking? The woman tore off her skirt while running so that it would not restrict her movements. She had a piece of a lantern pole in her hand. The beasts jumped at her from three sides. Zueia made three quick pole thrusts — each fatal. She jumped back so that the corpses wouldn't catch on her and fall. Mr. Berbelek pulled up his left sleeve, balled his right hand into a fist and hit his forearm. He gritted his teeth to keep from screaming. The bruise appeared immediately, absurdly large and dark, blood began to ooze from the pores. So Ihmet Zajdar is innocent. This is who murdered Magdalena Leese. Mamluks ran into the square with their keraunettes unlocked. Mr. Berbelek sat down on the wet marble of the fountain and pulled his sleeve back, hiding the bloody stigmata. Throwing aside her improvised weapon, Zueia approached her mistress. Shulima slapped her twice. Zueia knelt next to the corpse of the fourth gampanthrope and kissed Amitaka's hand, repeating earnestly: "Despoina, despoina, despoina." Mr. Berbelek has never heard of an ares-slave before; after all, it is a contradiction in terms, like a cold fire or a king without power. Even among the kratistoi, even among the Warlock, the ares are free soldiers. Zueia had tears in her eyes. Esthle Shulima Amitace turned and headed for the stairs,

the wind pressing her light gold hair against her tanned back. Mr. Berbelek had never seen her more beautiful. He clenched his fists. Thirty-seven, thirty-eight, thirty-nine, forty; good.

Θ

Dagger

Anies Panatakis unsheathed the dagger.

"Chthonitharchoth, Iahveth, Eulamo, now has a soul. Only touch the handle, the blade kills. I had to find a really crazy demiurgos, a water blacksmith, in the last days of decay, his body spilling out in all directions into a black sea; only he was able to morph venom into metal. Irga, with the sting of a manticore, kills everything living — if you touch it, it burns the skin, you scratch it and the venom enters the blood, stick it deep and even a kratistos can't remove it. Avoid water and rust, Esthlos. Keep it cold, in the dark."

The dagger had a Chaldaic blade — a narrow tongue of light metal, twisting like a hiewoi leaf, like a flame, an attacking snake — which clearly indicated its purpose: it was a weapon against Form, not Matter. Mr. Berbelek, of course, did not believe in all this magical nonsense, and he struggled to maintain a neutral expression as Panatakis muttered nonsensical onomata barbarika for several minutes. — but he had to admit it was a beautiful weapon. When he weighed it in his hand, a shiver ran down his spine, the cold elegance of death embedded in the object made the dagger a work of art. The demiurgos did not use any expensive metals, precious stones, nor did he play with engravings or ornaments: smooth steel, slim crossguard, straight handle, round head. The scabbard was made of crocodile skin. Also included were three straps with snap buckles; by pulling the straps through the symmetrical openings of the scabbard, it was possible to attach the dagger to a belt, leg or hand. The fourth strap

secured the dagger itself; accidental removal and touching of the blade could at least result in skin infection.

Mr. Berbelek, of course, did not tell Panatakis why he needed such a deadly weapon. Besides, he didn't have to: he came to the merchant (and this time to his house) the day after Esthle Lotte's party, and all of Alexandria talked about nothing else but the assassination of Izydor Ox.

"Quiet, I say, quietly and without witnesses!" Aneis shook his head, pouring Hieronim some herbal wine, which he tried to interest the co-owner of NIB in wholesale exports to Herdon. They sat on the carpeted floor of a wide balcony, five stories above the main street of Kartak, the new Indian district. "This is how you kill people. Why? This is a fluke, a botch and an insult to the gods! Bah!"

"Ox does not leave his house for a moment; they would have to launch a regular assault on it."

"Ha! Here is the question: How did they know that he would appear at Esthle Lotte's? What about so much in advance that they managed to organize the gampanthropes! I wouldn't like to be in the shoes of Ox's servants now, he won't be satisfied with just any oath."

"True, you did business with him."

"A dozen or so years ago, yes. I even hoped that he would marry Maja. Maybe it's better that nothing came of it..."

"It was a smart move though" Mr. Berbelek noticed "With these gampathropes: they could invade Lotte's land without immediately alerting her gampar. Laetitia has several dozen of them, a unique family morph, they can sense any stranger. It was a well-planned attack, in fact it should have worked."

"On the other hand, how many teknitoi of fauna in Aegypt are capable of breeding such siegemorphs of man and beast? Three? Four? The Hypatia will never forgive the attack on her relative's house."

"Even if one teknites confesses, so what? He is allowed to breed. Who bought from him? A broker of the middleman of the middleman. One of them has definitely ended up in the bellies of crocodiles — and the trail ends. If Izydor had one enemy, it would be obvious — but as I hear, he has so many

enemies that they can endlessly cast suspicion on each other."

"Holy truth, holy truth, I myself could not name all those ready to kill for open access to the Crooked Lands; they must expect great profits, although I really do not know on what basis. There will be more murders, that's for sure. But this is always the case when a new market, a new product appears. Well, Esthlos, how does it taste?"

"Mmm, you can probably get used to it. Aneis, I think I should look for a gun."

"A keraunet?"

"No, something small, just in case, but that even a behemoth would fall from one blow. A dagger, let it be a dagger."

"I understand, I understand" Panatakis nodded.

After a week, he handed it to Hieronim on the same balcony. The contracts signed with the African Company promised Panatakis profits so large that the safety of Mr. Berbelek suddenly became more important to the old factor than the safety of his grandchildren: a man looks a man in the face, a man shakes a man's hand, while the Merchant House has no will, no honor, no morph, after the death of Esthlos Berbelek, one would have to start everything over again with Esthlos Anujabar.

As for Hieronim's first request, here things progressed much more slowly. Panatakis sent successive letters to Mr. Berbelek through his men with the information he obtained; there weren't many of them.

"She lived in Alexandria in the years 1174-1176, 1178-1181, 1184 and with breaks from 1187." At Esthle Laetitii Lotte, at Esthlos Damien Shard, believed to be her lover (lost on Okeanus in 1186), and at the palace she rented in The Old Canopic District. Supposedly taken privately by the previous Hypatia. Letters of credit for large sums from banks in Byzantion and Gaudat's Land."

"She participated in at least three jurjas, in 1192 and 1193."

"In 1176, when the catacombs of the Pythagorean Insurgents were unearthed, she bought, ahead of the Library, the three best-preserved scrolls."

"Seen in Herdon."

"A dozen years ago there was a rumor that she participated in the Black Olympics; However, it turned out that the painting referred to depicted the winners of the XXV Black Olympics, from 964 PUR."

Mr. Berbelek sent a written inquiry as to what discipline Esthle Amitace's look-alike would compete in.

"In the Hundred Beasts".

"Apparently she made a Pilgrimage to the Stone."

"Unknown relatives. She mentioned her mother who 'rules in the east' Nothing is known about husbands or children."

"She bought the works of Vaik the Axumean; she is publicly accused of intending to rebuild his automaton and challenges the person who accused her to a duel. Unclear witness accounts. The challenged person (a short aristocrat from The Second Waset) died on the spot."

The dagger was light, cool to the touch, deadly beautiful. Hieronim pinned

it under his left forearm, closer to the elbow, the kirouffa sleeve concealed the weapon without a trace. At night, in the darkness and silence of his bedroom in the Lotte Palace, Mr. Berbelek practiced the movement of his right hand — one, fingers in the sleeve, two, thumb under the strap, three, grip on the handle, four, smooth withdrawal, five, push without swing, six, end — for the body to remember, even if the mind gives up.

STRICT time and place conditions had to be met. No witnesses — so just the two of them in four walls or in absolute nowhere. Don't give her time to defend herself — so without long preparations, without engaging in conversation, she would have known. Make it out alive myself — so strike only with 100% certainty that Zueia is nowhere nearby.

This third condition turned out to be the most difficult to meet. Zueia rarely left her mistress more than a few steps away, to the next room; now, after the attempted assassination of Izydor Ox, it was practically impossible to separate them. Mr. Berbelek began to think about a pre-emptive attack on the slaveares or even about enlisting the help of Zajdar, a nimrod after all. However, the strategos' instinct told him not to complicate the plan.

Meanwhile, the Aegyptian New Year was approaching, remembered in folk rituals and ancient cults despite over a thousand years of the Roman calendar. Astrologers from Memphis announced the beginning of the Nile floods in the third week of Junius. Isis's birthday was the ninth of Junius. It was the day of the beginning of a new life, new loves, a day of extraordinary recoveries and unexpected conceptions. At dawn in the Menoutian sanctuary of Isis, Osiris will rise from the dead, at noon the annual Wedding of The Hypatia will take place in the World Market, at two o'clock Nebuchadnezzar the Golden will appear in the window of his tower in Menout, in the evening the priestesses and priests of Isis will fight in the streets with the priestesses and priests of Manat, and at at dusk the Nile, its canals, lakes and tributaries will swarm tens of thousands of "cradles of Osiris" appear: slender boats with green lanterns hanging from the bow.

Mr. Berbelek woke up long after dawn, Lotte's palace was already filled with the sounds of bustle, unusually energetic for a day when Laetitia does not organize any party. The scent of myrrh and ful hung in the air. Someone was singing under the windows of Hieronim's bedroom. Mr. Berbelek looked out. A

Nubian slave feeding a gampar was humming a morning prayer to the Goddess of the Throne, words of forgotten meaning: "Nehes, nehes, nehes, nehes em hotep, nehes en neferu, nebet hotepet! Weben em hotep, weben em neferu, nutjert em Ankh, nefer em Pet! Pet em hotep, ta em hotep, nutjert sat Nut, sat Geb, merit Auser, nutjert asha-renu! Anetj hrak, anetj brak, tua atu, tua atu, nebet aset!" Mr. Berbelek squinted in the morning light. He saw doulos setting out pots of amaranth and lily flowers, doulos carrying slim likot boats decorated with erotic paintings towards the lake, he saw two servants kissing in the shade of a hiewoi — and suddenly, just as clearly, he saw before him the foolproof plan to murder Esthle Shulima Amitace.

Today in notes.

Until then, he didn't want to show himself to her. Through Porte he inquired about the details of the customs of Lotte's house: what time the boats leave, whether he has to rent his own, and whether they agree on signs, or perhaps on a place and time. According to the traditions of the Alexandrian Era, meetings should have been accidental, but of course they were not, the couples came to an agreement in advance, and the darkness and ritual allowed for boldness unthinkable in any other form.

Porte had booked a boat with purple ibises painted on the bow. Mr. Berbelek wrote a short letter to Shulima: *If Isis allows, with the flow of water — walking ibises, a hidden crocodile. In tremors — ϵ. H.B.*

Porte delivered it.

Mr. Berbelek waited. Half an hour, an hour, two passed. I'm too late, he thought, she couldn't have expected me, she had already exchanged signs with someone else; I should have planned something in advance. He threw a bowl against the wall. It buzzed loudly. Porte came running in surprise. Mr. Berbelek was also surprised: it was the first display of his sincere rage since — since — he didn't remember since when.

An hour before the Sun's Kneeling, Zueia brought the answer: *When you see the centaurs mating and the dryad bending over the hunter, know that the goddess has been kind to you. Don't pay attention to the flow of water. ϵ. A.*

The waters of Lake Mareot flowed so lazily in its remorphed eastern bend that there was no way to overcome any current. When Mr. Berbelek arrived

at the palace marina, the dark surface of the lake was already covered with a wide constellation of green stars. — in the glow of those closest to us, sixty or eighty boats from the shore, one could see the outlines of the boats carrying them, the noble profiles of high prows; next — only shadows among shadows, slow movement in the turquoise glow. The lights of Alexandria surrounded the dark depths in a shimmering rim: bright squares of windows, lanterns, torches, bonfires, everything merged in the burning glow of the metropolis. There had been a light rain in the afternoon, but now the sky was cloudless, a billion stars reflected in the water. The new moon has risen and will set with a dark face. From time to time, a flower of Syrian fires erupted over the city, and a wave of laughter and shouts flowed over the lake. Otherwise there was silence, rarely broken by a single call or a stifled chuckle. A few minutes earlier, an Ascalonian band preceded by Amidian trumpeters had marched across the Beleut Bridge, the echo of shrill music still floating over the dark waters.

Mr. Berbelek got into his Osiris's cradle and pushed himself away from the pier with an oar. Most of the boats (all palace boats) were equipped with two likot pseudo-masts: skinny poles connected above the passenger's head by a third, horizontal one. If the wind was not too strong, a roll of light fabric was thrown over the crossbar and attached to the sides on both sides, creating a kind of tent or canopy over the boat. Mr. Berbelek carefully placed the roll of silk in the compartment at the stern; under the scroll he hid a black kirouffa, identical to the one he was wearing now. A kirouffa — buttoned up to the neck, with its heavy hood pulled over the head — was his only clothing. The idea was to change them as quickly as possible and get rid of the bloody clothes.

Mr. Berbelek rowed a hundred pous and turned, paddling parallel to the shore. He watched for centaurs and dryads under the green star. Some of the boats were drifting with their lights off, side to side, symmetrical shadows. But most of the Isis lovers were still wandering around, searching. They turned reflexively, taking in the face of each rower they passed, the paintings on the hull of their boat. At one point, Hieronim thought he recognized the face of David Monshebe. (Where is Alithea? I should have asked Anton. So where is Abel? I have to pay more attention to my role as a father, it can't be that difficult.) Monshebe is of high birth, for him it's fun. There are very popular legends among the common people about brave young men who, at the risk of death, sneak on stolen boats into the waters of the aristocrats on the night of the holiday and extinguish the lantern of some divinely beautiful Esthle. Maybe there is a bit of truth in it, for teenagers from marble palaces this legend is also

somehow attractive...

Front, left: centaurs in a spring meadow. Calm water washes the Hellenic ornament of a boat rocking in a lazy drift. The silk tent pulled over it hides the silhouette of a passenger. Mr. Berbelek froze for a moment with his oar raised. He pulled a few more times, rowing to the other side of the drifting boat to make sure. But there could be no doubt: the red-haired dryad was creeping behind the crouching hunter, the Mareot was licking their feet.

Hieronim instinctively checked the dagger. It's there. He looked around. The closest witnesses were at least forty pous away. To the shore — one hundred and twenty pous. Any more excuse to procrastinate? None.

He rowed forward.

The boats rubbed their sides against each other. He threw down the oar and grabbed the ropes. The green silk pulled away, the hand with the snake bracelet helping him tighten the knot. The cradles met along their entire length, bow to stern, stern to bow.

He reached for the dagger.

"Put it out" she said.

"Extinguish the lanterns"— Yes of course. He turned off his light, went back to the stern, jumped over to Shulima's boat and turned off hers. Turning to the inside of the tent —

He reached for the dagger.

She also wore only a white kirouffa, unbuttoned, with the hood over her pulled back hair. She sat cross-legged on fringed cushions, with a bowl of fruit between them; She was peeling an orange with a small curved knife, and when Mr. Berbelek turned around, she threw it to him without warning. He caught it at the last moment, withdrawing his hand from his sleeve.

"Sit down, sit down" she muttered, wiping her hands sticky with sweet juice on a cotton scarf. All the light under the canopy came from the city and starlight filtering in from the bow; even if Hieronim had not obscured it, it would have been difficult for him to see the woman's face in this silk shadow and read her expression. All she had to do was tilt her head slightly under the hood. Is she

even looking at me? Damn orange, my fingers are already sticky.

He sat down.

Shulima put down the bowl, yawned, stretching her arms above her head — the kirouffa opened fully and the hood fell off — smiling, she kicked a round pillow towards Hieronim, and then, in one fluid movement, full of girlish grace, she stretched out in front of Berbelek on the down floor: the head is raised on the arms resting on the elbows, a mischievous glint in the eye, the legs bent at the knees sway to the rhythm of the gentle rocking of the boat, silver wedding rings flash on the toes, the soles of these feet are as white as the Vistulian snow.

"You're spying on me" she said.

He reached for the dagger.

"Oh, your orange fell."

She almost forcefully pressed the fruit into his hand. Her face was so close, he wouldn't even have to bend down, he wouldn't have to straighten his arm, he would plunge the flaming blade into her eye before she could even blink. Just this orange, this orange from Sheol, what is he supposed to do with the orange?

Shulima smiles ironically, her legs flash in the shadow.

"A friend informed me that some people were asking about my transactions from years ago, what I bought where and for how much, where the money came from, and the like. It turned out that they were partners of a certain Mr. Panatakis. Who runs your company's business in Africa. You won't deny it, will you, Hieronim?"

He threw the orange overboard and wiped his hands on the tail of his black robe.

"Who are you?" he was hoarse.

She laughed.

"Well, you don't expect that on the night of Isis a woman will tell you all her secrets!"

"The Warlock's Spawn!"

"Don't believe this Panatakis, he's Alexandria's biggest fraudster. He is stronger than he seems, he could not get so rich by having a slave morph, don't be fooled by appearances."

"You sat at his throne during the Crimean Homage!"

She pursed her lips.

"Oh no, it's over for Shulima."

She's mocking him! The blood pounded in his ears.

He reached for the dagger.

But why is he still slower? The hand should precede every thought. Meanwhile, before he could unsheath the blade, Shulima was already sitting on his lap, with her feet on the port side of the boat, her arms around Hieronim's neck, trapping his hand clasped on the steel handle between their bodies, and whispering words like drops of hot water into his ear in aristocratic Greek. honey:

"Hieronim, Hieronim, Hieronim. Listen to my heart, drink my breath, see my delight. I won't lie to you about morphs. Do I come from Rog? Is there even a trace of the Form of Maksym the Widower in me? Who here is more like the god of black mourning and tragic love? Say. How could I serve the Warlock? You shouldn't think like that."

"You were there."

"I was there, sitting by his side. How do the kratistosi communicate with each other, how do they negotiate, make alliances, establish the boundaries of influence, and divide the keros? They can call a king, a ruler, a leader to themselves, visit him in his residence, he will pay homage or not, he will bend or run away — but the face-to-face meeting of two kratistosi must mean war, a clash of Forms so powerful that the keros crumbles and breaks: every word a challenge, every gesture a compulsion, mere presence an attack. They can't meet. They send intermediaries. People whom both sides know will not give in, that their Form is strong enough; if they have not been broken, then they bring the truth. They cannot remain dependent on anyone. They don't pay tribute. Nothing settles permanently in anyone's aura. They come from outside. They themselves guarantee the truth of their words: that they are what they are. They never lie, they cannot lie. Lie down, Isis is watching us."

This scent, this scent, what kind of perfume was it, narcissus, ashucha, ful — Aegyptian jasmine? She unbuttoned his coat with her left hand and pulled his hood off his head with her right. She pressed more and more weight on Hieronim, he had to support himself or fall on the pillows. When he takes off the kirouffa — what about the dagger? He turned to face the port side, pretending to be entangled in his flowing robe, which gave him two seconds to undo the straps and throw the sheath with the weapon into his boat, then immediately stretched out on his back under the tent, taking Shulima with him. The boats rocked. She put two fingers into his mouth and then sucked the saliva off them. "I surrender" she whispered, opening his kirouffa. In contrast to the black fabric, his body was almost white; her body, tanned, smooth, cleansed of any blemishes, wrinkles, animal hair under the hands of expert teknitoi, seemed twice as alive, incomparably more healthy, strong, filled with hot energy, vis vitae. She ran her nails down his stomach, squeezed his growing member in welcome, ran her nails along the inside of his thigh. He embraced her, pressed her, body to body, soft breasts on a hard chest, breath to breath. She looked him straight in the eyes, her gaze was clear, joyful and calm. Seven, eight, nine; there is nothing, there is no trace of the Warlock in her. "But I'm not fighting" he whispered back "I've already thrown away the weapon. She opened her thighs, and he felt warm moisture on her skin. "We all fight, every minute of our lives." She tilted her head and traced the wrinkles of his face with her finger. He couldn't help but smile, the morph of her carefreeness relaxed his muscles and straightened his thoughts. So who exactly was this woman?

He wrapped her hair in his hand, pinned up above the nape of her neck; clenching his fist, he yanked her head back. She moaned.

"So we fight" he hissed. "Magdalena Leese, librarian of the Vodenburg Academy. Your Zueia kicked her out of the *Al-Hawidzah*; in the anthos of a similar ares, I could cut likot with even the dullest knife. She opened a Form of destruction so strong that to this day the blood hasn't come out from under my fingernail, and do you see that scar on my forehead?"

"I'll recommend you a good teknites soma."

He pulled harder. She didn't defend herself.

"Leese recognized your moon ritual in one of her books" he said. "Or maybe she belonged to a sect herself?"

"Bad luck, a one in a billion chance."

"Didn't they teach you? 'There is no good or bad luck, only weaker and stronger morphs.' "

Shulima was still smiling.

"Mine was stronger" she said.

"Is that what you think of me? — That your morph is stronger? So I'll do whatever you want? Yes? Tell me! What do you need me for? Why are you dragging me on this jurja?

"You came here and you don't know why? I guess that answers any questions about strength."

She felt his erection wither. She frowned. He let go of her hair and closed his eyes.

She took his head in her warm hands, kissed his forehead, his eyelids, and his lips. He parted his lips. She bit his tongue.

"You came here because I asked you to. You want me because I wanted you to want me. What do I need you for? You — for nothing. I need Hieronim Berbelek. You will take me to him. I want the man who can spit in the Warlock's face."

He was faster than her scream. He turned her over on the pillows, pinning her arms above her head. The skirts of their kirouffa were completely tangled, a wild mixture of white and black, in silk and in flesh. He pushed her legs apart with his knee, inserted his fingers into her, and she screamed a second time. She saw a bird of prey above her, hovering in the air for a moment before striking. Narrow eyes, dilated pupils, flaring nostrils, veins under the skin. He crushed her wrists in his grip. He didn't look away from Shulima's face, and when he saw the first flash of genuine fear, he grinned cruelly.

She licked her lips.

— A single thrust.

One blow.

A copy of the most accurate known map of Africa, prepared in 1178 by Mazer ben Keshla surnamed Kalamus, a scribe and cartographer of the Hurat court, when unrolled occupied the entire hyex table in the library of Lotte's palace and flowed from both sides onto the marble floor. Mazer ben Keshla was the first terrestrial cartographer to openly use images from orbit to draw maps. Like most, he followed the tradition of describing the globe introduced in the Alexandrian Era by Philogenes of Gades, who in practice developed calculations from the *Geographica* of Eratosthenes Kyrene: a division of the sphere into twenty horizontal, parallel circles, ten southern and ten northern, measured from the equator by the same angular length. The circles were divided into ten subcircles each, each subdivided into ten, and so on. Uranometers constructed by Babylonian astrologers had constantly improved since the time of Hipparchus allowed diopters to precisely determine the geographical sum. The geographical difference was measured in twenty leaves, ten eastern and ten western, also divided by the decimal system. West and east converged on a line crossing Gades. Eratosthenes, comparing the angle of the shadow in Alexandria and Syene, calculated the length of the Earth's circumference: a quarter of a million stadia. Despite the most expensive gypsy clocks, there were still difficulties in determining geographical differences during travel — the anthos of individual kratistos had different effects on the operation of chronometers — which is why the Hurats (no doubt having first sought the advice of their kratistos Joseph the Just) finally allowed the help of the Moon folk. Kalamus was also the author of canonical maps of Europe and Asia Minor. He died while working with a hired teknites on a self-mapping globe project; sophistae and philosophers have invariably argued that such a mechanism constitutes a fairy-tale impossibility.

Mr. Berbelek pressed the edges of the map against the dull hyex table with empty candlesticks. The high windows of the library were wide open (the windows of the Lotte Palace generally remained open; most of them did not even have glass or shutters), and since they faced east, the morning sun poured in in blinding cascades. Birds sang in the garden.

At one point, a yellow leafbird flew through the middle window and perched on an antique Manat figurine. Mr. Berbelek winked at it. The bird tilted its head and opened its beak.

"Seventy-eight... five and five... twenty four..." Ihmet Zajdar muttered under

his breath, counting furiously on the abacus, leaning over the map. Zenon and Abel stood on its sides, leaning on the black countertop, tracing colorful Africa with their fingers.

Mr. Berbelek walked around the table from the other side. Doulos brought a tray of fresh arfajs. Hieronim threw one to the boys and broke the shell of his own, hitting it with the base of a candlestick.

Alexandria — third northern circle, second eastern leaf — glittered on the pergalon with a golden crescent that stuck out along the shore of the Mediterranean Sea into the western part of the Nile Delta. The Blue Nile wound south through yellow deserts and green jungles, almost reaching the edge of the table. Successive cataracts and a line of heliograph towers were described in careful Greek, running along the river and through Great Axum, to Agorateum, located almost on the equator, where all the ships from India and Dzunguo landed. A second, perpendicular line of heliographs led from New Babylon, through Alexandria, and along the entire northern coast of Africa, to the Hall in the first western leaf.

However, the further from the communication routes, the deeper south and west, the more general the map was and the more scant the descriptions; the first and second northern circles west of the Nile and south of the Golden Kingdoms remained almost empty except for a few major highlands, located by Mazer probably on the basis of orbital maps and finely calligraphic clues gleaned from legends and traveler's tales.

"I have it!" Shulima exclaimed, appearing with a large atlas under her arm. She threw it on the table and pulled up a high stool.

Mr. Berbelek stood behind her with the broken arfaj in his left hand, and ran his right hand along Amitace's spine, over the warm, smooth skin and under her loose hair. Shulima sent him a warning look over her shoulder, but did not move away. She was flipping through the large pages vigorously.

"This: 'Paxus' second flight, one thousand one hundred and eighty-eight. We used their sketches to plan previous jurjas. Look, here they have a part of the Turtle River, there should be The Dry River here, and these hills — these are the Crooked Lands, The Skoliodoi."

She turned the atlas around so they could look at it. Ihmet put down the

abacus.

"We still have to decide which way we will approach. As far as I know, there are three routes. Down the Nile to Pachoras and straight southwest. Down the Nile to Fort Vulture and west. To the Kingdoms and then south. Well, you can also cross-country through the eastern Sahara..."

Shulima raised her head.

"When did you announce this?"

"The twelfth, Esthle. Quintilis' first week as a tentative departure date. Planned time: three months. Financing from equal contributions."

"And?"

"If I'm going to stick to the original limit on the number of participants, I should be closing the list now. I, you, Esthle, Esthlos Berbelek with his son and daughter, Esthlos Lotte, that's half a dozen. Assuming ten slaves per man —"

"Make it fifteen."

"We're going to get stuck with this two-hundred-man army."

"Half of them will run away just at the stench of the Twist" Shulima muttered.

"And animals" Zajdar continued, scratching his aquiline nose. "The day before yesterday I talked with the nimrod Daniel the Armenian. He says he'll try the sky next time if he can find someone to insure an air pig for him. You need to hire at least two fauna demiurgoi. Also, some trustworthy half-breed to negotiate with the local savages..."

"Don't worry about that, I know a very good one. As for the route." She leaned over the table, bringing the open atlas to the corresponding part of the map.

Hieronim couldn't resist the geometric curve of her back. Raising the arfaj, he released a stream of cold juice onto Shulima's brown skin; it quickly dripped towards the fold of the cotton skirt. Shulima shuddered. Swearing, she turned to Mr. Berbelek. He smiled mischievously and shrugged. She kicked him in the shin — she wanted to kick him, but he moved away just in time. She showed

him the Reverse Horns. He bowed.

Abel and Zenon watched this across the table, barely holding back their laughter. As Shulima turned back to the map and atlas, Abel nodded knowingly. She glared at him.

"About the route. The Golden Kingdoms. Why? Four reasons. One, the Nile is clogged. Two, the rainy season in Axum. Three, a pig will take us to the Kingdoms without any problems, a few days and we're halfway there. Four, it is the widest access. This means that we can decide on a specific route in the Kingdoms, based on better information. and coming from the north, we have access to almost the entire Crooked Lands, there is no reason to explore what has already been discovered, ninety percent of these lands are unexplored. I'm talking about the eastern half of the first leaf and the western half of the second leaf in the second circle." She traced an area on the map with her fingernail. "How about the money?" she said to Ihmet.

"I calculated ahead. Of course, private equipment is not included in the scope. The prices of keraunets have gone up recently. I hope you've already stocked up."

"We're on our way to the gunsmith's" said Abel, noticeably looking at his father.

"I have three more meetings today" Hieronim spread his hands.

Mr. Berbelek indeed did not have much free time these days. Since the disclosure of the NIB agreement with the African Company (and Aneis Panatakis had spread the word about it in Alexandria probably that same evening), Hieronim, as the attorney and co-owner of Njute, Ikita and Berbelek, had been contacted by dozens of merchants and entrepreneurs with business proposals, for which both sides will surely earn, if only Esthlos Berbelek deigns to sacrifice an hour, half an hour, a few minutes to get acquainted with this brilliant idea, please, and how little it takes to implement it, really, the sum is not worth mentioning, but since you ask, Esthlos... Some of them showed up at Panatakis's, but some of them approached Hieronim immediately, often inviting themselves to Lotte's palace under one or another pretext, or waiting outside its gate and jumping into the departing wityka with Mr. Berbelek. Hieronim was horrified by the rumors Aneis had spread about him; someone else is ready to kidnap him for ransom! Or Abel or Alithea! But these were Alexandrian customs, this

is how business was done here: forced, under violence, on the verge of fraud. Equal partnerships were rare. Wealth was linked to blood and morph even more strongly than in the north, in Europe. As if, in fact, the southern aristocracy retained in its Form more of the original ferocity that brought its ancestors to the top of the social pyramid.

Nevertheless, among this mass of financial touts, there were people with ideas worth attention. When you came across a business that promised profits, you had to take it over absolutely and run it yourself. This is how Mr. Berbelek purchased for NIB, for example, an experimental jewelry workshop (testing the art of grinding precious stones into sharp edges and even planes), a Gypsy ruby glassworks, smelting the transmuted ruby metal in large quantities, and the texture of alkimic poisons, which were supposed to significantly increase the harvest in subsequent floods of the Nile. That afternoon, he had an appointment with, among others, the inventor of the pyromaton, which allowed the achievement of previously unattainable temperatures in metallurgical furnaces, which should finally enable the purification of Matter into pure Ge, the self-element of the Earth. If the sophistae's theories were confirmed, it would open the way to the mass production of self-elemental materials: endless, unbreakable threads, steel thinner than silk, harder than diamond, soft marble with a thousand-year memory of form. — and without the participation of any teknitoi or even demiurgoi. Mr. Berbelek even attacked the inventor's sincerity. But how can we know in advance which Aristotelian hypotheses will turn out to be correct and which will not?

He found himself talking at length about these dilemmas to his son as they huddled in the shade under the roof of the shooting range in the workshop of the Demiurgos Jan Ormas and waited for the slaves with another pair of keraunets.

"Hmm, if it were true, you could also make light armor strong enough to stop a bullet." said Abel, weighing in his hands a beautifully carved and painted keraunet with a three-pous barrel. "Let The Horror hide with his hydor graphite!"

"Note that self-elemental, truly purine scale could also be used to make lighter and much more powerful keraunets. Just think about the pyresiders!" Mr. Berbelek raised the keraunet to his eye and fired quickly before the weight of the weapon prevented him from aiming. Thunder pierced his ears, and the butt of the behemoth's muzzle kicked him in the shoulder with a force worthy of a morphezoon.

The shooting range was equipped with height-adjustable barrel rests, but that was not the case when they will shoot on the jurja — you have to choose weapons according to the conditions. Hieronim groaned loudly as he lowered the behemoth keraunet. An Ormas slave took away the heavy weapons.

"Tomorrow I'll bring Alithea, she needs to find something to her strength" said Abel.

Mr. Berbelek grimaced involuntarily.

"What?" Abel huffed. "Do you think she won't be able to handle it?"

"Has she ever held a keraunet in her hand?"

"No. Just like me. I will teach her. It's easy."

"I'd rather leave her in Alexandria."

"You've got to be kidding. Esthle Amitace is coming — how do you plan to stop Alithea?"

"Esthle Amitace. Of course."

"Why wouldn't Alithea be able to handle it? Because she's the youngest? This niece of the Veronius family is not much older than her; and she's coming, right?"

"Let the crows and the scorpions feed on their ears, what do I care about them? I'm worried about Alithea. The living rooms of Alexandria are one thing, the wilds of cacomorphic Africa are another. Let's just say she panics once at the wrong time... What, keep her in camp the whole time?"

"You know, sometimes you have to take a risk so that the Form can define itself, decide this way or that."

"Ohoho, Mr. Latek has read a book!"

Abel smiled broadly, white teeth flashing in the shadows.

"Don't worry about Alithea, it will turn out that she actually stays in Alexandria, and then you will regret that she is not coming with us.

"Wait a minute, what are you talking about... This ares Monshebe, right?"

"Oh, what do I know? Better ask your Shulima.

"Damn it, Zeus, because if I suddenly become a grandfather...!"

"No, she drinks black herbs every moon."

"I don't want to hear it about it!"

Abel laughed, raised the keraunet to his eye, and squeezed the trigger. There was thunder. I think he even hit the target.

AN *hour after dusk, I'll be waiting at the back gate. Before you leave, Esthlos. Please. Aneis.* The letter was the same as always, but for some reason the thought of an ambush occurred to Mr. Berbelek. Who would ambush him by impersonating Panatakis? He couldn't imagine this anymore.

Why have I become so fearful? — he growled inwardly at himself as he walked through the palace garden, immersed in warm, damp darkness. A young gampar passed him, its green eyes drilled right through his soul in a split second. Mr. Berbelek checked the dagger in his left sleeve.

But of course it was Aneis Panatakis — in his own unique person.

"Bows, bows, bows, a thousand blessings to Esthlos Berbelek, I beg your forgiveness that at such a time and in such circumstances, I am truly burning with shame, but the gods would punish me if I did not try to dissuade you from this, Esthlos, I am afraid for your life, you can't die now, it would break my heart, you can't!"

A heart, right, a bank account, Mr. Berbelek thought.

He led the factor further away from the gate so that the Mamluk guards wouldn't hear them.

"What exactly are you talking about, Aneis? Speak like a person!

"Do not eat."

"What?"

"You told me, Esthlos, that you're leaving for the jurja tomorrow. Do not eat."

"Come on. Everyone must eat."

Panarakis tugged at his beard, spat, crossed himself, drove away the biothanatoi with his left hand, opened his right hand for Akaza, stamped his feet, looked nervously around the night; finally he began in a whisper:

"I spoke to Izydor. Yes, yes, Ox finally accepted Panatakis. Izydor broke down. He is terrified. He says it's all because of the Crooked Lands. Ever since the rumors started, and then, after the first trophies brought from beyond the Turtle, and especially in recent years... He wrote down a chronicle, hired a sophistes, and showed me the documents. Since one thousand one hundred and eighty-six, when the court physician of the Hurats confirmed the first cacomorphia. They sent their spies, envoys, agents, rats. They rented caravans as cover. They bought out entire companies. He's first in line, he has the best access. He was strong against Alexandria, no one could threaten him. But now he receives such offers that he can neither accept nor refuse, they have taken hold of him. Esthlos, he spoke of kings, of kratistoi! There is an entire underground war, visible neither on the chessboard of politics nor on the chessboard of money. The jurja is probably also their invention and a fashion imposed on the aristocracy so that they could travel there without arousing suspicion. Condemn me, gods, if I know why. The Oxs' sophistes also only guesses. He speaks of a topomorph, a second Al-Kaba, a place of spontaneous distortion of the keros. But what does it matter? — they just want to get their hands on it, guarantee profits and exclusivity. Such as pashupa. The sophistes claims that people from the Axumean provinces conducted experiments there, planted hemp outside the Sucha, and instead of hashish resin, they squeezed pashupa juice. Now this rumor is spreading around the world; but the farther from Skoliodoi, the less strength. Others again believe that one of the exiled kratistos escaped there, that he has gone mad, is dying, has surrendered to the jungle, and this is the anthos of his mortal madness. Or a new one was born from the inhuman savages, these barbaric Negros, and so powerful that even as an infant he left an imprint on the whole land with this unheard-of morph and —"

"Aneis, listen to yourself: Ox infected you with his terror, now you spread it like a corpse's stench. You came straight from him, right? You better go get some sleep and forget about all this."

"Esthlos!"

"Go Go." Mr. Berbelek turned to the gate.

"Gauer Shebrek of Babylon, do not go with him, Esthlos, the Ox swears that he is a spy of The Seven-Fingers; he wants —"

Mr. Berbelek, irritated, quickened his pace. He didn't know how much of Panatakis's gibberish was true (probably nothing), but he knew that continuing to expose himself to this nightly litany of fear would indeed leave him with a lasting residue of Izydore's cowardice. This is not the way to go on a jurja.

Returning to the palace through the dark garden, he wandered thoughtfully into the maze of narrow alleys on the shore of the lake.

The topography now matched his state of mind. Wherever you turn, only shadows, shadows; a rare clearing of moonlight, and even that is suspicious. The light of our Lady. If Shulima really has something to do with this cult and wants to use the cacomorphy of The Skoliodoi for their purposes... How does she want to use me? A situation like that on the lake will soon arise, so that I can ask Shulima openly; in the meantime, I am left to allusions and guesses. Her plans probably include Alithea as well, I don't think I'm wrong in assuming that it was Amitace that pushed her towards this young ares from Thebes. Or maybe Shulima is just whimsical, we shouldn't attribute too much premeditation to women, we end up looking like stupid obsessives. Anyway, the ares is going back to Upper Aegypt, Alithea is coming with me, in the end maybe it won't be such a bad idea, how many times have I had the opportunity to talk to her alone, work on the Father-Daughter Form? Not once actually. I will give them the trust fund documents; this will be a good opportunity. Writing a will wouldn't be a bad idea either. Anujabar rightly said: If not for children and not for the afterlife, then why do we try at all, why do we accumulate wealth and the goods of passage? Because that's our nature, just because. Since man can change according to his will...

Someone was sneaking through the dark alleys, a shadow among the shadows, a branch snapped, a bird flew away, acacia leaves rustled — Mr. Berbelek stopped, looked around, stepped back and leaned out from behind a tree trunk — a slender figure entered the clearing of silver light, wrapping up her skirt — it's a woman — she knelt down, brushed away the dirt with a few quick movements, took a long scroll from her belt, and then pushed it down. Patting the

dry ground back, bent over — she had long, flowing hair, small breasts — she hummed something in a voice sometimes stronger, sometimes weaker, without lifting her head. Mr. Berbelek stepped forward; his hand instinctively felt for the hilt of the dagger. The words were Greek, the accent hard; the voice itself seemed familiar to him — the hardest thing to recognize is whispering, singing and screaming.

The woman repeated the recitation again:

"Come to me, Lord, Thoth, as seed enter women's wombs; come to me, Lord Thoth, who gathers the food of gods and men; Come into me, Ibis, Ebony, and bind me with your morph — David of Monsheba, son of Malit, his eyes, hands, fingers, arms, nails, hair, head, feet, hips, stomach, buttocks, navel, chest, nipples, neck, mouth, teeth, lips, chin, eyes , forehead, eyebrows, shoulder blades, shoulders, nerves, bones, marrow, stomach, member, legs, health, income, possessions, fame, name, morph — bind it in this parchment! So that from now on, whether someone drinks, works, fights, talks, rests, lies asleep, day or night, in the sun or in the shade, alone or among people, so that always — he thinks about me, he misses me, he wants me, no one else but me, and any woman who would like to approach him, let David, son of Malit of Monsheba, turn away from her, from her hands, eyes, breasts, belly, vulva, mouth, entrails, body and shadow, name and morph, and will run away from every place, every house, every city, away, away, away, thinking only of me. For you are I, I am you, your name is mine, my name is yours, your morph is mine, my morph is yours — for I am your mirror. I know you, Thoth, and you know me. I am you, you are me. So do this, Lord — now, now, quickly, quickly, now, now!"

Mr. Berbelek withdrew slowly, taking care not to attract Alithea's attention with any sudden movement or sound.

I.
Jurja

SADARA, Asadra Al-Kubra: paradise, desert, unfinished paradise. On board *The Rising*, during the two-day flight to Am-Shasa, Mr. Berbelek began keeping a jurja diary. He wrote in Vistul. At noon on Quintilis 10, when the Pig of the Air was already approaching the eastern slopes of the Tibetan Mountains, Hieronim wrote: If there is one thing that Illeia the Cruel should be remembered for, it is the creation of the Golden Kingdoms. The previous day they had flown over the Sadaran highlands, two, three hundred pous over fields of golden grass, that "poor man's wheat", the shadow of the air pig flitting across the fields like the hand of a god gently stroking its shiny fur. From horizon to horizon, as far as the eye can see, there are only golden fields waving in the hot wind. Nobody even grows it anymore, it's a weed, this is how the teknitoi flora of the Illeia morphed it: to survive even in the desert, to turn rocky fallow land into flowering meadows.

Gauer Shebrek, who claimed that he was educated as a sophistes at the academy in Kum, did not hesitate to boast of his knowledge:

"Even before the times of Aegypt and the pharaohs, there were kingdoms and great cities here, now forgotten, destroyed by sand and wind. It was a paradise for farmers and cattle breeders: the most fertile lands, the best climate; man's first gardens, one might say. But the shape of the world changed and this whole part of Africa turned into a barren desert. People fled east towards the Nile, and the First Empire was founded. Kratista Illeia devoted nearly three hundred

years to reverse this process and give this land a life-giving morph. Perhaps if she were given another three hundred, we would see the true return of Paradise here."

Shulima advised him ironically:

"Emigrate to the Moon, its morph is over five hundred years old."

Gauer Shebrek shrugged.

"Maybe I would, if it were possible. For now, I'm dreaming of Elking."

In the afternoon of the 10th of Quintilis, which was the Dies Mercurii, Mr. Berbelek went to the cabin of Esthle Amitace to discuss the matter of hiring half-breeds and savages before arriving at Am-Shasa; From the beginning, Amitace claimed that it was best to do what she did, she had already rented them there once. In fact, she was the only person with any Jurja experience. In reality, however, Hieronim hoped to recreate the Form from the Night of Isis in the forced privacy of the cramped cabin of the aerostat.

Shulima deprived him of all illusions: she ignored the allusions, did not return his smile, did not allow the slightest relaxation of her morph; Additionally, she called Zueia halfway through the conversation and didn't send her back. Mr. Berbelek should have felt the anger of rejection (anger would have been welcome), but he left Amitace in merely a melancholy mood. It was to be expected, he told himself; the goddess gives, the goddess takes away. In the end, I flew to the jurja — there is no longer any need to tempt and bribe me.

On the pig's balcony, sat Alithea and Esthle Claudia Veronius, daughter of Esthle Marek and Esthle Justine Veronius, who were the first to report to Ihmet Zajdar; Justine's stepbrother, young Esthlos Tobias Livius, went with them. The Veroniuses lived in Alexandria for only half a year, having moved from Rome, and Kratista Syktus's morph was still clearly visible in them; and Livius, merely visiting Alexandria, remained a Roman to the core.

Alithea and Claudia sat on the edge of the deck, their legs stretched beyond the edge of the safety net. Leaning forward, almost hanging on the brimstone, they looked down between their bare feet, which were constantly swinging back and forth in perfect rhythm. They were both wearing similar loose shalwars, with white hats pulled down on their heads, and Mr. Berbelek saw the difference

in form between them more clearly. Alithea, who was already half-Aegyptian, had skin the color of dark honey, long black hair, slim hips and high breasts, and a narrow nose. Claudia Veronius clings more tightly to her native morph: fair skin, fuller figure, wider shoulders, rounder face. Well, Claudia probably didn't go to the most expensive teknikes soma every other day to undergo a morph strengthening to Nebuchadnezzar's anthos, as Alithea did, no doubt at Shulima's instigation. In Hieronim's eyes, all this was an element of Shulima's cunning plan, aimed at tying Alithea to the ares Monshebe. He could not find a motive here, but at that moment he was able to convince himself of even the greatest perfidy of Esthle Amitace. What started this with Maria...

He sat down next to Alithea, on the left, stretching his legs between the meshes. He immediately felt his shoes slip off his feet. The impression was absurd, shoes — well-fitting Vodenburg jugras with high boots — they had no right to slide down; Nevertheless, he leaned over to eat something and only then did he believe his eyes.

Africa passed beneath them at great speed, the wind ruffled the hair, ruffled the girls' hats, whistled in the rigging of *The Rising*, the legs of Hieronim's shalwars and the tails of Hieronim's kirouffa fluttered. They flew only thanks to the pneumaton and the large aerostat fans; despite the resistive, motionless masses of hot air, no wind dragged them along. The land was only a hundred pous below the cargo masts of *The Rising*. If a hill or an exceptionally tall tree appeared on their route, they could only rely on the pig captain's reflexes. However, the upland was as flat as a table: the same morph of Illeia the Cruel that animated and exploded the Tibetan volcanoes leveled the ground around the mountains for thousands of stadia. Even in the frequency of the appearance of acacia, baobab and palm groves and in the distribution of streams and rivers, there was an unnatural regularity, a striving for order etched in the keros. — Kratista Illeia must be a truly methodical person, extremely well organized.

Several villages also passed under the pig: clusters of circular huts, usually hidden among the trees, with a few faint wisps of smoke rising straight into the blinding blue sky. The savages raised their black faces and followed the speeding aerostat with their eyes. Alithea and Claudia waved at them, but they probably didn't see them at all, blinded by the sun.

The Rising scared away several herds of wild animals: antelopes, gazelles, even a small herd of elephants and feral oglaks. More often, they encountered

herds grazed by dark-skinned shepherds, large herds of tame cattle, hundreds, thousands of them. Chowolla, tapalopes, mamules, akapasi, humiya, trisla — all a morph of Illeia and her teknitoi. In fact, they did not react at all to the passage of the aerostat.

Mr. Berbelek inhaled the air of the golden savannah deep into his lungs and tasted the scent of wild anthos. Since the seventh century PUR, since the exile of Illeia, the Golden Kingdoms have not had a kratistos powerful enough to encompass them all with its aura. For the most part, they were still under the influence of the kratistoi of unconscious, often tribal shamans living somewhere on the outskirts of the Kingdoms. — in such villages as *The Rising* had just flown over. After all, it was already wild Africa, detached from the forms of civilization. People drank blood here; they mated with beasts, burned children alive, slaughtered entire cities in fits of inexplicable frenzy, submitted to the morphs of nameless deities from before the beginning of time; people and non-people, beings even further from perfection.

"Over there!" Claudia exclaimed, pointing to a point in front of the pig's beak, on the horizon, under the sun spilling half into the sky, with monumental mountains in the background. Bright reflections shot out from there, a hot star emerged from under the horizon.

"Am-Shasa" Alithea said. "We are already arriving. Do you think it's really made of gold?"

"You should have listened to Mr. Shebrek, the fountain of all wisdom" said Hieronim, involuntarily raising his voice to be heard above the whistle of the wind. "This is illeum, clay created by mixing dust ejected by the Tibetan volcanoes. They burn it into very durable ceramics and use it to make roof tiles. Apparently also bricks, I don't know, we'll see. It actually shines like gold in the sun."

"We'll probably stay there for a while, right?" Since we're going through the Golden Kingdoms...

"Maybe a few days, until we organize everything and choose a route. There are six or seven such cities in Sadara, maybe we'll hit Am-Tuur if we go straight west. It depends on which route turns out to be the most promising: you have to ask around, gather information from local hunters, bribe shamans... Maybe we can go deeper into The Skoliodoi."

"A friend of my father's" Claudia interjected "he shot a flying snake behind the Sucha."

"A snake?" Alithea frowned. "I mean, what? It had wings? How did it fly?"

"Long as this pig. He showed me the peeled skin, which hangs on the wall in his hall, twisted into a spiral. They had to nail it, otherwise it would float up in the air on its own.

"I hope I can hunt something similar. A snake or a dragon or a hydra; there can be anything there, right? Bring home a trophy like that."

"Don't be afraid, in Vodenburg any cacomorph will make an impression" said Mr. Berbelek.

"Vodenburg?" Alithea looked at her father, clearly agitated. "Are we going back to Neurgia after the jurja?

"That was the plan." Mr. Berbelek chose his words carefully. "Alexandria, Iberia and Vodenburg for the winter. What kind of house did you have in mind? Esthle Lotte's Palace?"

"You could buy some property. I know, you do business there, big money, everyone says, with this Esthlos Anujabar, you don't have to go back to Vodenburg, Esthlos Njute for sure... What? Why not?"

"Would you really like to live in Alexandria?

"Abel too, ask him."

"Any specific reason?"

She pursed her lips.

"Vodenburg is ugly."

Claudia burst out laughing.

Mr. Berbelek shook his head sadly.

"Really?"

Alithea shrugged. He saw the different moods move across her face like

clouds across the sky, one darker than the other. Sulking, hunched, with her lower lip bitten, Alithea fled into a childish form; she was a child.

He put a hat on her head and smoothed her hair.

"We'll think about it, we'll think about it."

She beamed immediately; there was nothing he could do — he had to smile, he wanted to smile.

He wrapped his right arm around her.

"If you tell me the truth" he says, still smiling.

She immediately turned grumpy again. Claudia giggled in earnest. Alithea stuck her tongue out at her.

Ostentatiously turning away from them both, she rested her forehead against the stiff rope and slung her arms through the net. She looked at the ground beneath her feet again.

Hieronim got up and brushed off his shalwars and kirouffa.

"If Shulima stays, you will stay too."

Mr. Berbelek stopped mid-step. Grabbing onto the likot net, he leaned over his daughter.

"What did you say?"

She waved her bare feet over the shimmering silver lake, from which a frightened bird had just risen, a twittering storm of red, yellow and blue feathers.

"Nothing."

"WHAT? Say that again."

"A xewra. Don't make such a face, it's exactly the same as riding a horse or a zebra. Besides, it was morphed from a zebra. Very popular in the second

and first circles. I suggest taking thirty."

The animal was six pous at the withers, strong, massive legs, a neck slightly longer and more curved than a horse's (but the head itself was undoubtedly a horse's) and a long, bushy tail. The short fur arranged symmetrically on the sides of the Xewra in a multi-colored patterns, not black and white stripes, but with butterflies, complicated ornaments, yellow, brown, purple, even green. A teknites' whim, Mr. Berbelek supposed; similarly, Abraxas Gekun, who had finally managed to breed a riding zebra a thousand years ago, was drawn to the form with fiery red eyes without any rational reason. — that's just how Great Abraxas was.

"Everything else and the luggage, if not on carts, will go on camels and humiyas, but we must have mounts for hunting" said Shulima, patting the Xewra's neck with one hand and the other — swatting greasy zarzas from its face. "They withstand cacomorphia very well."

"If you say so, Esthle." nodded Esthlos Ap Rek. Unlike Hieronim, he had gone to the Am-Shasa market in Aegyptian sandals, and now he was stopping every now and then to wipe his feet from yet another pile of manure he had stepped on. However, he still remained stoic, as befits an old courtier.

When Zueia was paying and Shulima was negotiating the final terms with a gray haired black man, Mr. Berbelek was looking around the crowded market for Alithea and Claudia, who had already left a moment earlier in the company of two of the Veronius' doulos. Zajdar, Zenon, Abel and Tobias Livius did not go to the market with the rest of the hunters at all, choosing breakfast with the Roman envoy, as it turned out, was an old friend of Livius. The Veroniuses went to explore the ruins of the Labyrinth of Illeia, and Gauer Shebrek disappeared from the hospice before dawn.

When a loud commotion broke out on the other side of the xewra pen, behind the slave trader's station, Mr. Berbelek immediately thought of Alithea — and it was the right thought. He ran through the crowd, pushing himself and hitting people on the legs and backs with the reed rod, becoming even more nervous in the morph of excitement that was taking over the crowd.

He found Alithea and Claudia safe and sound, discussing in raised voices with a local saddler about a tribal morphunk stretching his ears and lips to monstrous sizes; he did not express himself in a way that was easier to understand. He

spoke in some local dialect, the girls spoke in Greek, the onlookers shouted in Pahlavi and a dozen other dialects, and poor Parrot tried to translate it all. Everyone, of course, helped to articulate their arguments by waving their hands energetically.

Mr. Berbelek struck a rytke three times against a saddle pad, trakkk, trakkk, trlaskkkk!

"Silence!"

The locals of course, did not understand that word, but they immediately fell silent.

Mr. Berbelek waved the rykte in a wide semicircle in the air. The onlookers took two steps back. He turned to them.

"What is going on here?" he asked Alithea

She looked scared. Only after a moment did he realize, that he was holding the rykte as if to strike. He lowered his hand.

"What is this about?" he said.

"Someone was trying to rob us" Claudia quickly replied.

"Who?"

"He escaped. The slaves ran after him."

"I hope that they at least abandoned the money."

Alithea revealed a purse. It is the servants and doulos who always pay, the aristocracy does not dirty its hands with mammon. A custom useful in similar situations: if someone's robber must be beaten, let the slaves bother with the beating

"I-I saw Estle Latek" Parrot interjected, rushing to bow before Hieronim "I came to ask where to find Esthle Amita-ace. Esthle Latek a-a-asked me, to translate at the fair. I noticed this man, standing there behind the wagon, watching us. I pointed-I went to the merchant, so he could confirm, i-if that was his m-man. B-but the other then pulled up his hood and left. I shouted 'thief!' and started to run. The ss-sl-slaves ran after him."

Parrot was Shulima's half-wild interpreter. He only stammered when speaking in civilized languages; the other, wild half of his morph was stronger.

"If they understood what you were screaming, it's no wonder he ran." Mr. Berbelek muttered. "What did he say next? — the saddler pointed. — Maybe he was actually his man?"

"H-He said no.

"Sure, now he wouldn't confess, even if it was his son." Mr. Berbelek turned to the girls.

"What exactly did you want to buy here? Grab it quickly, you get it for half price. We already have saddles.

"That whip" pointed Alithea.

"Rukata" Claudia corrected.

"That rukata"

"But, they are used to herd cattle, they won't be useful on the jurja"

"What, I'm not allowed to buy it?" pouted Alithea. "I've seen them shout louder than a keraunet. I'll learn"

Mr. Berbelek waved his hand

"Esthle! E-e-esthle!"

Parrot went to Shulima, who had just appeared with Zueia

"I-I've met with them, they are waiting! By the wa-wa-waterhole. Let's go! Esthle!"

Just in case, they left Anton at the saddler's stand until the Veronius doulos returned from the pursuit, most likely fruitless; the rest moved towards the southern gate of the market. They emerged onto the wide, sandy Cattle Trail. The city's waterhole is located below the Am-Shasa, where the upper river flowed free and spread widely over the golden pastures of Sadara. Fortunately, no herd was being chased along the route, only a dozen mamuils were trudging along the side of the road, lazily herded by a lone local child.

The closer to the drinking water, the greater the density of zarzas in the air. These insects, morphed in the distant past from dung flies, by whom and for what purpose are unknown, are a common scourge of Africa. Even Illeia's anthos failed to drive them out; or maybe after her exile they simply returned, having previously spread throughout the Earth. Mr. Berbelek drove away from them with his hands and his rykte; In the end, he simply laced up his kirouffa, he pulled the hood over his head and squeezed the white fabric with his left hand, leaving only an opening for the eyes. Others did the same if their clothing allowed them to. The women were fending off the zarzas by fanning themselves with their hats. The zarzas were black, fat, three times the size of flies. According to legend, they were born from eggs laid in the corpse of Kratista Vercyngoteryxa Glinoeater, during the First Kratistos War. Mr. Berbelek was now able to believe in this fairy-tale necromorphy. They passed a hidden corpse, completely covered in zarzas, the stench and the deafening buzz of the insects caused headaches.

The tribe was called N'Zui and its Form included long limbs, black and shiny skin like coal immersed in sebum, tall skulls with strange dimples above the forehead. At the watering hole, squatting in a semicircle on a patch of untended grass around the bend of the Trail, under a lonely baobab tree, waited five N'Zui warriors, one old and four young. They stood up as the white men approached the tree. Parrot spoke quickly in the tribe's dialect. The old man was a shaman, and the warrior with a manticore skin loincloth — the second son of the chief, would lead the negotiations. His name was N'Te, which meant One Who Bites. He grinned widely at Parrot.

"He-he's asking who your chief is."

"Shulima was already driving with them..." Mr. Berbelek started, but there was no point in finishing, the form was established without his participation, Parrot, already explaining the question, looked at him, the rest also instinctively looked at Hieronim, and One Who Bites read it flawlessly, standing in front of Mr. Berbelek. The others took a step back. Hieronim knew that there was no point in opposing the situation, and it was most likely simply a consequence of the event at the market. He still had the rykte in his hand, he just had to lift it.

He took off his hood, revealing his face. He struck the rykte against his thigh. The shaman howled, bit his hand and pointed his bloody fingers at Mr.

Berbelek. N'Te grinned even wider. He pointed to the ground between him and Mr. Berbelek. They sat on their heels, Parrot on the side. Negotiations have begun.

Mr. Berbelek demanded one hundred and eighty warriors as porters, animal drivers, trackers and hunters, for camp work and for fighting when necessary; for three to five months. N'Te demanded one gold drachma for each warrior for each month. The Jurja's budget could afford it, but of course the first offer must never be accepted. After fifteen minutes of the affair, even Parrot became unnecessary, Mr. Berbelek and the warrior communicated by raising their straight fingers, drawing lines on the ground and shaking their heads. In the end it was one and a half drachmas for every three months. They spat and trampled on their saliva.

Mr. Berbelek stood up and stretched his back. In fact, he remained there alone, even Shulima left. Parrot discussed the details with N'Te.

"Who will lead them?" asked Hieronim. "I want someone who would be directly responsible for the warriors."

"Him."

"Who?"

Parrot pointed to N'Te. He Who Bites nodded as if he understood their words. What mattered was the fact that he didn't get up, he was still squatting on his heels and looking down. Mr. Berbelek raised his voice. The warrior clapped, again and again. I've taken more dubious oaths before, Hieronim thought. He turned towards the city.

Alithea and Claudia had long lost interest in the negotiations. Having crossed the Trail, they played with ryktes, unsuccessfully trying to produce effective sounds. Anton and the Veronius' two doulos watched this, bursting into laughter from time to time — until Claudia accidentally hit one of them. Then they chased each other screaming and laughing, the girls lost their hats and got their skirts dirty. Above them, in the background, a golden city was rising on the southeastern slope of the Ebe Saddle, and Am-Shasa was dissolving in the evening twilight, but for now it was still bathed in the rays of the sun hiding behind the Tibetan Mountains — terraces upon terraces, with one- and two-story square buildings crowded without a clear plan, with walls and

roofs dazzling with yellow light at this time of year. A fire was lit at the top of the ziggurat of the Njad temple, the priest had just eaten the heart of today's sacrifice. Lights came on in the windows of hundreds of houses. Children of shepherds drove cattle from watering holes to pens and herds. Naked and half-naked women of various shapes were returning from the upper springs, carrying jugs and gourds of water around the city, their voices floating with the river's current, the incomprehensible twitter of half a dozen dialects. Alithea ran past Hieronim, waving her rykte after the cackling Anton; the fun continues. Even the zarzas seem to have decreased. The sun was hiding behind the crooked edge of the mountain, and the shadow slowly poured over Am-Shasa, like cold blood from a torn artery of the Goddess of Day. A melancholic feeling gripped Mr. Berbelek's heart: the scene is too beautiful, too calm, too much carefreeness and warm colors. Such moments are remembered, regretting what is irretrievably lost.

It is prudent to take a medic with you on any large hunt, especially on a jurja, and Ihmet had hired one of the most experienced in Alexandria, an old Axumean of a dark-skinned morph, a demiurgos of the body, Mbula Talon. Mbula was said to be over a hundred years old, but he presented himself as a very spry old man, which was a good indication of the strength of his Form. In a way that is difficult to explain, he made friends with the girls on the first day. During the journey with the pig, he entertained them by cutting his arm, leg, and foot with a purinic knife and explaining the internal structure of man; they grimaced in disgust and seemed to turn their heads away, but they watched, fascinated, and finally giggled as he quickly closed the wounds. He spoke plebeian Greek. He was the only man shorter than Mr. Berbelek among the jurja participants.

It is Talon — not Zajdar, not Parrot, not Shulima and not Livius, but an old physician — who brought information that determined the choice of route.

"Marabratta, here." He jabbed at the black and white map with his crooked finger. "Next, five hundred stadia along the Sucha and south. The Skoliodoi is beyond the border, of course, but you can see it from the treetops. He swears it's a city."

"A city in the Crooked Lands?"

"Yes."

"Built by whom?"

Mbula put a hand to his forehead, the equivalent of a shrug in the low circles.

"Are there any people living in the Skoliodoi?" Esthlos Ap Rek was astonished.

"By definition, since they live there, they're not people" Gauer Shebrek muttered.

Zajdar leaned over the map.

"Marabratta... Katamush... Abu Ti... Do you know these lands?"

"I-I know. B-but I've never been behind Marabrat-t-ta."

"Who does?"

"I don't know. No one."

"What about your freedman?

The nimrod turned to the medic.

"Where did he come from? Would he come with us as a guide? Gold in hand and so on. What?"

"No. Never. He's been sweating sand and salivating mud for half a year, and he's only just gotten back into his form, and he's still shitting rocks and rust is pouring out of him."

"The eyes and ears of a man with the soul of a barbarian give poor testimony" Mr. Berbelek muttered. He looked around the veranda of the hospice. "Everybody? Good. The third day in Am-Shasa, we are wasting time. What decision? Marabratta? Yes? There you go. Ihmet, Marabratta. Parrot, run to N'Te: tomorrow at dawn behind the waterhole. Pack up, pay, go to bed early. Yes, Esthle?"

Justina Veronious lit tobacco from a trembling candle flame.

"I would like to know" she said, releasing dark smoke from her mouth "who and when made you strategos of this jurja, Esthlos."

Mr. Berbelek walked up to her, took the tobacco from between her fingers and took a drag. Marcus Veronius sat on the other side of his wife, Hieronim

looked into his eyes as he flicked the ashes onto the clay floor of the veranda.

"You, Esthle" he replied, not taking his eyes off the older man. "Just now."

"What now..." Justina huffed, jumping to her feet. Mr. Berbelek stopped her mid-movement by placing his hand on her shoulder. She sat back down. He leaned over her; Esthlos Marcus was now in his line of sight behind Esthle Justina.

"Do you want me to lead you?" he asked quietly.

She tried to seek support from others, but she couldn't even look away, Mr. Berbelek's face was too close. There was no threat or mockery in him, he did not smile, he looked at Veronius calmly, almost friendly. She couldn't say no.

She nodded.

He gave her the tobacco back.

As he was returning to the table with the maps, he noticed Abel. His son stood in the doorway leading to the porch, hidden in the shadows. He's spying on me, Hieronim thought. It is good or bad? After all, that was what Abel wanted: to inherit the morph. Doesn't the relationship really work both ways? Well, why do I need this purely theatrical power? I don't want to lead the jurja at all. But I knew, I expected him to be watching... This is how it develops, it feeds on itself, it grows imperceptibly from the most trivial things: a body reflex, a quick word, an unthought-out reaction, a roar in the air, an order from my mouth, so they look at me, expect another one, so I behave as the situation requires, Parrot, the saddler's prices, and since they, what and N'Te, and if he, what and Esthle Justina, and if she, what — What — what is your life exactly, strategos Hieronim Berbelek.

"We don't do the things we want to do, only those that are in our nature" he muttered in Vistul.

"What?" Zajdar looked up from the map.

"Nothing nothing. Have you already counted how many days?"

Later, when the pink crescent rose over Am-Shasa and only Mr. Berbelek, Tobias Livius and Mbula Talon remained on the veranda, the three of them

smoking a local variety of Herdonian herb in clay pipes and drinking the so-called "bitter gold", an alcohol fermented from the golden grasses of the Sadara, and a strain of more vile beer — then Abel appeared again. Hieronim handed him a cup without a word. Abel sat against the wall, keeping his distance. Esthlos Livius entertained Mr. Berbelek with stories he heard from the Roman envoy: about the growing number of jurjas traveling through the Kingdoms (only one left Am-Shasa on the southern route); about the terrible trophies brought by hunters from the Crooked Lands, which here, outside the anthos of a civilized kratistos, retain much more of their original, impossible Form; about the untranslatable tales of wild wanderers from the first circle, which infect whole tribes with panic; of sophistae from Aegypt, Babylon, Sidon, Tritium, Axum, even from Herdon and the Inverted Lands, coming here to study the Form of the Skoliodoi; about atmospheric phenomena that break out from time to time from the Crooked Lands and haunt the southern outskirts of the Kingdoms: clouds of fire in the sky, lightning striding through the desert on thousand-pous legs, about rains in which everything living dissolves like overcooked dough... Mr. Berbelek asked Mbula about the city of Skoliodoi. The freedman was clearly not very eloquent, Talon could only repeat a few phrases about "black pyramids" and "stone trees of light". At the end, Livius fell asleep with his head on the table, succumbing to the "bitter gold". The medic towed him to the bed.

Abel stopped his father for a moment.

"Would you let me just once..."

"What?"

"I would like to lead one hunt myself. To see if I am capable..."

Mr. Berbelek shook his head.

"But why?" Abel huffed.

"Not like that, not like that" Hieronim sighed. "If you were really capable, you wouldn't ask for permission."

"Ah! Stupid aphorisms! Why should I argue with you and argue in front of people when I can just ask?"

"But if I let you lead it." Mr. Berbelek dragged the "I let" between his teeth like indigestible gut "Is it really going to be you or me?"

He slapped his son on the back and smiled crookedly.

"Aren't you spying? Watch. Did I actually ask for permission? Do you think Esthle Veronius could have forbidden me anything?

MR. Berbelek's first Xewra was called Ulga (purple flames on her sides, her neck in a spiral of lush green), the second Xewra, Luzak — Satiety (red zigzags, white breast).

All mounts had pyromorphic marks in barbarized Greek. Ulga turned out to be very well composed, she could feel the slightest tension in her thigh muscles, constantly tilting her head, controlling the rider's movements out of the corner of her eye. A trader in Am- Shasa swore that hunters would even be able to shoot from the saddle. The nimrod Zajdar checked it out, they had barely left the city, having driven far enough away from the caravan so as not to cause panic among animals and people with the keraunet's thunder.

The caravan consisted of eight carts pulled by four teams of chowols, and three dozen humiyas, onto which the heavier luggage would have to be loaded when the jurja reached terrain impassable for the carts. In the end, in the Crooked Lands, N'Zui's porters will probably carry everything anyway. Zajdar, Parrot and N'Te planned their route to avoid jungles and deserts. Down to Marabratta they would travel through the savannah, Sadaran baobab forests, and the edge of the rocky hamada. They were going west, southwest.

The first day was the day of rites. One hundred and eighty porters appeared before Am-Shasa, each with a leather pack on his back, a triangular shield of likot bark and buffalo skin, and three kurroi, curved spears of humiya bone, somewhat like harpoons. When tied together, barbs out, the bodies are as a flesh-ripping club, a kurrote; when pressed separately, they pierced gazelle completely through. Mr. Berbelek couldn't hold back his ironic smile. Here was the army, his army — the beginning and end of every strategos. They waited, sitting on their heels, in the twilight of predawn, until the red mane of the sun had just risen above the horizon. N'Te stood up, pointed at Hieronem with his kurroi and shouted. Mr. Berbelek drove closer, with his head hooded with the kirouffa. Parrot and the next one stayed behind, behind the carts and the animals; but now it was not about the content of the words, the content did not matter. Hieronim came from the east, through the sun's radiation. Standing

in the stirrups, He pointed his rykte towards N'Zui and ahead towards the west. "Let's go!" They stood up without waiting for N'Te's signal of command.

Of course, this was just the beginning. At noon, when they stopped for the "water hour", one of the warriors leading from the humiya river tripped and hit Mr. Berbelek, who was talking to Zajdar. It was so obvious that Hieronim and Ihmet even had time to exchange amused glances before Mr. Berbelek turned around and slammed man across the back with the rykte. The warrior jumped screaming at Hieronim — he wanted to jump, but Mr. Berbelek didn't stop, he was already face to face with the pous taller N'Zui, and instead of hitting, the other man took a step back, two, three, Mr. Berbelek followed him, with a stony face and his rykte pointing to the ground. "Dog!" he hissed (and the warrior, of course, did not understand the word). "Obey!" With the fifth step, he began to hit the warrior on the chest, on the face, on the back, when the latter hunched, bent, and finally fell to his knees, Mr. Berbelek then slapped him across the neck, placed his shod foot on the warrior's back and pressed, forcing his head into the ground. When he finally stepped aside, N'Zui, without taking time to catch his breath, intoned a choking song-litany and began to bow before Hieronim. Mr. Berbelek left without looking back.

That night they set up camp for the first time. Mr. Berbelek decided to immediately instill the customs of times of danger, assigning a tenth of the warriors to guard duty and grouping the tents in a circle of wagons. In fact, the greatest threat will most likely turn out to be nocturnal predators with an appetite for fresh meat of chowols, humiya or xewra, but Hieronim played Berbelek's strategos with too much commitment, Form is either true or not, there are no half-forms, "sham forms" has anyone ever heard of a strategos-optimist? It's easier to meet a cowardly ares.

On the second day, as they moved beyond the villages, pastures, and farmlands surrounding Am-Shasa, The nimrod began teaching the inexperienced hunters how to use a keraunet. In the morning they drove several stadia away from the caravan; there they shot at boulders and tree trunks. Apart from Alithea, Abel, Claudia and Esthlos Ap Rek, Gauer Shebrek also admitted his lack of knowledge with pyr weapons (Ihmet claimed that the Babylonian indeed seemed to be unable to handle a keraunet).

Esthlos Livius laughed that this is what the jurja looked like now: social outings of the aristocracy who had never smelled pyr before. On the second

night, around the fire, when they had sunk into a talkative form, warmed by "bitter gold", Tobias confessed to the five years he had spent in Rome's Overseas Legions. He showed a morph on his shoulder. Mr. Berbelek understood how much it costs for this twenty-something to pretend that he does not realize who Hieronim is. Or is at least not showing it to him. Mr. Berbelek wrote: *Why, when I met them in the salons of Europe, these young aristocrats so curious about the taste of real, mortal danger that they would suck it even from my corpse, that's exactly what they did, why was their morph reflected back at me like the mirror void in another mirror? — and now I feast on it without moderation, I shamelessly look into their eyes — where did this change come from?*

The nights were very cold, as cold as the days — hot. Standing on the savannah facing the sunrise, you physically felt the passage across it, along with a visible wave of light, an invisible wave of heated air. During these few minutes, the frost from the blades of grass disappeared, the colors of the earth and sky changed, suddenly you found yourself in the middle of an ocean of rippling gold, with your head bowed religiously, because in Africa it is impossible to look the rising Sun in the face, this is the land of gods of fire and blood. The N'Zui had their talismans, they had hideous idols hidden in bundles, and sometimes at dawn they would take them out to drink from the sun, when its rays carried the greatest power; then they returned to the darkness, patting the stone abominations affectionately.

Much of their behavior resulted directly from the ferocity of their morph, which was still half-animal; even if their description could somehow be put into words, it was difficult for civilized people to understand these behaviors. N'Zui warriors, for example, did not accept any orders from women. Of course, Shulima coped — but Alithea and Claudia came with a complaint to Papugiec and Mr. Berbelek on the first day.

Hieronim just shrugged.

"You can't command respect with an order."

"But I need them to put the water where I show them!" Alithea was irritated. "Pox on their respect, they don't have to respect me!"

Mr. Berbelek sighed and added wood to the fire.

"They're wild, honey. Have you ever seen a fierce warrior woman? Or a

female leader? Civilization liberated us from the rule of the inherited morph and gave us power over the hills, the world submits to our will, the will decides — but they, they are like animals. They can be trained, but they cannot mold themselves, so their women are unable to impose a Form on themselves that gives her power over men; they really are "imperfect men." Their demiurgoi do not even realize that they are demiurgos; teknitoi they kill or turn into shamans; even the barbarians' kratistoi have no awareness of their own morph, their anthos are auras of random savagery, amplified reflections of the local distortions of the keros. Look at them." He pointed with a burning stick beyond the circle of wagons, into a shadow full of darker shadows, where came the moaning singing and the murmur of quiet conversations in a croaking and smacking language. The N'Zui fires, small ones built on dried dung, with green and blue flames, were invisible from here. "Wherever they go, whatever they see, their ignorance will remain unmoved."

"Thank you very much" Alithea replied sarcastically. "Couldn't you just give them an order?"

"You would come running right away for the next order. Over and over again. You have to cope. You have Anton. Take a cue from Esthle Amitace."

"Exactly." Claudia looked back at Szulima's tent. "They listen to her. So why is this? Why?"

"Because E-Esthle Amitace is not a wo-woman."

They stared at Parrot, frowning.

"Will you tell us how you made this discovery?" Alithea snorted.

"Not a woman, I mean — who is she? A man? A hermaphrodite? An ifrit?" Claudia laughed.

"Mah'le, a d-daughter of a g-goddess.

"Indeed, convenient" Alithea muttered after a while. "Couldn't this goddess have more daughters?"

Mr. Berbelek did not smile.

"Are you mocking me? Only in legends are gods born from gods." Alithea

waved her hand. She was tired, Hieronim wasn't telling her what she wanted to hear. Mr. Berbelek watched the girls leave with sad contemplation. Perhaps fatherhood is not about taking children seriously and with complete sincerity, perhaps he has confused the forms.

Meanwhile, Alithea spent most of her time with Shulima, Shulima and Claudia. In the first week, as the jurja passed through the lands of the N'Yoma and Berechute tribes, which were directly adjacent to the lands of N'Zui, so these peoples had a long and bloody common history and Parrot advised to avoid any encounters, however innocent. — in the first week, no one strayed further from the caravan than a dozen or so stadia, like the nimrod during shooting practice. But then they started going on longer and longer trips, often leaving at dawn and returning at dusk. The caravan was moving at a slow pace, the landscape was changing very slowly, the glassy eyes of the natives constantly looking at the whites did not make the journey pleasant either. — one wanted to get away, at least for a moment. Africa spread her arms wide, the great, bright space beckoned. They jumped on the xewras and drove off towards the horizon. Groups quickly formed: Shulima, Alithea, Claudia (usually with Anton and Zueia); The Veroniuses and Zenon Lotte (also with a servant or two); Esthlos Ap Rek and Gauer Shebrek sometimes together with Zajdar, but equally often the nimrod left alone or with Esthlos Livius. Livius, moreover, did not move away from the caravan, like Mr. Berbelek, Hieronim , after all, thus filled the Hegemonic form of the jurja — What kept Tobias Here?

Concerning Zajdar the role of nimrod was well defined — With every stadium separating them from civilization, the Persian's Anthos flourished. At first, of course, this was sensed by the animals, xewras and humiya: they raised their heads, snorted nervously, dressed their hooves as soon as he appeared in sight. His own xewras listened to him like the most faithful dogs. On the 23rd of Quintilis the nimrod took a dozen N'Zui with him for the first time to replenish his game supplies; they returned even before the evening, carrying a piece of elephant meat separated with a butcher's precision. The nimrod knocked it down with a single thunder, the bullet piercing through its armored skull. At night, the warriors danced the course of the entire hunt by a big bonfire. Meanwhile, Ihmet began to dress in the style of southern manatites: bare feet, black shalwars, leather vest with pockets for ready loads for keraunet, with a white trouffa, usually wrapped around his head in the daytime so that only his blue eyes could be seen and a black beard, getting thicker. At night, he would put on a thick, linen julbab and a sickle burnous. In fact, only then

could he be found at the caravan: after dusk, before dawn. He moved around the camp from shadow to shadow, soundlessly, appearing suddenly and without notice, dissolving into the darkness. The girls said he was scaring them, but Mr. Berbelek knew that nimrods do nothing on purpose, not even knowingly. The N'Zui brought kurroi to Ihmet to bless them. Zajdar licked their bone blades and, with disgusting tenderness by sliding his wide tongue on the hooks and burrs. One evening, during the full moon, Mr. Berbelek spied him crouching by the porter's cow fire, the nimrod biting raw meat, swallowing large mouthfuls with a loud gurgle, the blood soaking into his chin. A grinning N'Te handed him another slab.

25th of Quintilis. We went through the upper ford of the Taitsi. It is getting harder to write, the pen no longer fits in my hand. Everything is closer to the earth. We are slowly leaving the morph of civilization.

On the night from twenty-seventh to twenty-eighth, between the Dies Saturn and Dies Solis, Ihmet Zajdar appeared without notice in Mr. Berbelek's tent and, crouched at the head of his bed, he woke him up with a short shake. Hieronim reflexively reached under the bed. The nimrod grabbed his wrist.

"Quiet, it's me"

"I see that" hissed Mr. Berbelek "Let go of me"

Ihmet released his grip.

Mr. Berbelek sat down. The entrance of the tent was fastened from the inside, Porte slept in front of the tent, and the canvas was not cut anywhere, if Mr. Berbelek could judge it in the moonlight. He decided not to ask how the nimrod got here.

"Tell me"

"We are being followed"

"Who, how many, how far, how long?"

"Sixteen humiya and camels, five zebras. Fourteen or fifteen people. They

often separate, the main group stays about half a day from us, south, southeast. Two or three scouts on zebras come closer, they follow the trail, overtake us and fall back. They cover their tracks very well, I did not risk close approaches. They're not locals, not only."

"How long?"

"I don't know, at least five days, I'd have to leave you for a week to see if they're from Am-Shasa."

"Are these scouts exchanged here or at the main unit?"

"Best to take them twice. The scouts will tell you what's going on, we'll know what to expect."

"Are they hunting?"

"Yes"

"Nimrods, ares?"

"None; or they hide. But good trackers, very good."

"Do you know where they are at this moment?"

"The scouts? Fifty stadia" Ihmet indicated the direction with his hand. "Unless they're out for some night reconnaissance."

"Three or two?"

"Two"

"Good, go wake Esthlos Livius and Esthle Amitace"

"Esthle Amitace? Why her?

"We might need her slave"

The nimrod stood up.

"Ihmet?"

"Yes"

"Would you respond to an order with a question to a real strategos?"

Zajdar laughed unexpectedly.

"Would a real nimrod come to ask what to do with a hunted animal?"

He left, throwing open the tent flap, waking up old Porte.

They left the camp under the full moon, with three hours of darkness to spare. Berbelek, Zajdar, Livius, Zueia. They took three large warriors with them. Mr. Berbelek had previously issues precise orders to N'Te by Parrot. All the warriors were roused, guards were posted for several stadia in the savannah; the caravan was to set off at dawn as usual, the route had been determined; however, no one is allowed to stray out of sight. In the absence of Esthlos Berbelek, the Mah'le is in charge.

A good horse can beat fifty stadia in a dozen minutes. Xewras were supposedly much better on longer distances, but there was still enough time left until dawn. They couldn't just gallop straight at the enemy either.

Fifteen stadia from their expected camp, they stopped and dismounted.

Zadjar took off his julbab and vest and ran into the night without a word; for a moment they saw him as a thin shadow under the moon, then the dark savannah swallowed the nimrod. Having bound the xewras legs, they sat down on the ground. Of course, a fire could not be lit, they trembled with cold. Africa breathed slowly, deeply in her sleep, the grass bent every few minutes, a soporific sound floated across the plain, shhhhhh, sleep. Scavengers' eyes flashed among the grass. Nobody spoke, they were waiting for the nimrod. Mr. Berbelek played black futures in his head, very convincing in their absurdity: Zajdar brought him here on purpose, he wasn't lying in that there is actually something lurking there in the darkness — at him, at Esthlos Hieronim Berbelek, now they will catch him here without any problem, separated from the caravan and the army, with one soldier and one ares, and of them, there may be twenty of them, they will shoot him without warning, because he believed and allowed himself to be led into an ambush, once he would have no doubts, no one would able to lie to his face and not reveal himself, but now —

"Two, sleeping, zebras on the opposite side, come on" the nimrod gasped as he emerged from the night.

They got up, pulled out long keraunets from under their saddles, two each, including Ihmet. They checked the loads, checked the hammers and anvils, slung their weapons on their backs, and then followed the nimrod, who set a rapid pace. A modest ratakac grove emerged from the night with an uneven lunar shadow. Zajdar pointed west: zebras. Mr. Berbelek nodded to Livius. Tobias ran that way, making a wide bow.

They overcame the last hundred pous bent to the ground, almost hiding in the grass. After crouching behind the trunk of the first tree and calming his breathing, Mr. Berbelek, in six short gestures, presented a plan, as simple as all the best plans. The nimrod gave Hieronim and Zueia his keraunets, and took out a long hunting knife. He will approach from the east, Berbelek and Zueia will cover the area at right angles, from the north, to keep the firing field open. Hieronim slapped Ihmet on the shoulder. They split up.

The scouts slept among the roots of the crooked ratakac tree, hunched low over a small clearing, the crown almost touching the ground. The ares and Mr. Berbelek, positioned fifty pous from the fire, in the thick bushes, they could see only the outline of the dark hills in the shadow of this tree.— body or no body, you need to believe a nimrod. They were waiting for Zajdar's move. Every few minutes, Africa's long breath shook the branches, a cold sigh from the depths of an unknown land, shshshshsh, and again silence, and inhale, and exhale, and inhale, and exhale, they didn't see the nimrod at all until he straightened up over the motionless scouts and waved his hand. —Now!

They approached. Wrapped in woolen blankets lay two men, twenty and thirty years old, both of an Aegyptian morph, perhaps more southern.— Nubian? — Axum? Mr. Berbelek knocked the blankets off them with the barrel of his keraunet. Dirty, worn out clothes; Yet at the same —A gold ring on the thumb of the elder "Tie them up" he ordered Zueia and went to get Livius. He brought the zebras to the clearing, and sent Tobias for the xewras.

Meanwhile, the younger bandit, apparently less stunned by the nimrod and perhaps with a harder skull, regained consciousness. Mr. Berbelek nodded to Zajdar. The Persian spat, moved the knife wedge across his tongue, and then began cutting off the prisoner's fingers — the prisoner screamed until the zebras got scared — one by one, starting with the left thumb; they fell from the hand like a ripe fruit. A fifth, an older bandit, bald as an Axumean's knee, came into light. He widened his eyes at Hieronim and Zueia, crouched with

their keraunets across their thighs, and Zajdar sitting astride his companion, meticulously licking the blood from his knife after each cut. "After you." said Mr. Berbelek in Greek and then repeated it in Latin and Pahlavi. The Axumean immediately began to speak, broken Greek flowing freely; the nimrod stopped his blade. The younger robber, who had two fingers left after everything, was sobbing and wheezing alternately.

As it turned out: the jurjas have grown into a whole industry, the legal and the illegal. Frontier bands like this one, living by robbery and mugging on the outskirts of civilization, between the kingdoms and the anthos of the kratistoi, saw their chance. Of course, there was no question of a frontal attack on the jurja, and an attack on a merchant caravan would have been much more profitable, at least they were carrying some riches; but there was another way to squeeze money out of the northern aristocrats. They were waiting for a group of several people to go away for a longer hunt — and abduct every major hunter. In order to avoid any mistake in identification, members of the jurja were closely observed even in the cities of the Golden Kingdoms: who matters, who pays, who they bow to. It is best to kidnap his relatives; the dream victim is children. Aristocrats pay hundreds of talents. The exchange takes place in the desert parts of Sadara or in the depths of the jungle, under the wild anthos.

Mr. Berbelek remembered the alleged thief at the market in Am-Shasa. Of course, I should have guessed.

Meanwhile, Livius returned with xewras.

"I find it hard to believe" he shook his head. "Alexandria would be abuzz with gossip. No one even mentioned it."

"This is not a city where a person willingly admits to weakness" said Mr. Berbelek.

Tobias stood over the robber.

"But most of the jurjas are run by nimrods, how could you expect them not to track you down?"

"They never tracked them down. Never before. In the past three times."

Hieronim looked at Ihmet and raised an eyebrow. The Persian put his hand to his forehead.

They threw the shackled kidnappers onto the zebras and walked back towards the jurja camp. The sun hadn't started to come out of the ground yet. Mr. Berbelek rode next to the zebra of the elderly robber (his name was Hamis) and listened to his hurried confession in the silence of the African night. — what only Hamis could reveal, what was suitable for betrayal. There are fifteen of them, the leader's name is Hojrik Kafar, a deserter from the Memphis Guard. Bounties were placed on the heads of five of them in Aegypt, Axum, Huratia, the Ephremian sheikdoms, and the Golden Kingdoms. There are no ares or nimrods among them, but one demiurgos of water, who opens springs for them in the deserts. All armed with keraunets. You can get to their camp either way; they exchange then and there; if it's worth it, here and now. Will you spare my life, Esthlos?

The change of the scouts was to take place the next day, so there was no point in waiting. Mr. Berbelek placed the prisoners under N'Te's supervision. He ordered Parrot to announce that in an hour a military expedition would set off, an opportunity to gain loot, fame and the favor of the gods. Fifty brave ones! Of course every kurroi went up. He Who Bites chose. As for the hunters, Ihmet, Tobias, Zueia and Parrot will go with Hieronim, but almost everyone was willing here too — after all, it was finally a real adventure. They were about to be attacked by bandits! There will be something to tell. Even old Ap Rek fell into forms of youthful excitement. Mr. Berbelek refused. Abel only asked him once; he was refused too. Alithea and Claudia, hearing the short "no", were ostentatiously offended. While supplies were being packed into the humiya, Hieronim gave Shulima his last instructions. She listened in silence. Finally, she gave him her hand. He kissed the inside of her wrist, hot skin over pulsating veins.

The caravan and Berbelek's team set off in opposite directions, quickly disappearing from sight. A dozen animals and half a hundred warriors stretched into a long snake. — they were heading straight into the Sun rising over the savannah, into that tunnel of hot light opening on the horizon. The N'Zui began to sing, raising their voices according to the rhythm of the run. Ihmet immediately broke out in front of the group, melting into the Sun. Mr. Berbelek stayed behind, closing the rope of warriors and animals.

After half an hour Abel appeared at his side on a sweaty xewra. He answered his father's gaze with a broad smile.

"Do you think you can forbid me anything?"

Mr. Berbelek hit him with a roar through his chest. Abel fell from the xewra.

Mr. Berbelek stopped Ulga; he waited for the boy to get back to his mount.

"Now you will obey my orders."

"Yes, Esthlos"

In the Sun, in the Sun, in the Sun, when the heat increases every minute and the dry air scratches at the throat, tighter with each breath; when it comes to saying a sentence or a word, you first have to swallow your saliva, but since there is no saliva, you reach for the waterskin before opening your mouth. Hoods pulled over heads, hats on, kirouffas rolled up — wherever it comes from, blessed is the shadow. Shadow, cold, damp, soon it is impossible to think about anything else, the mind slips away from the will. They did not stop at noon, and they will not stop until they reach their destination. The N'Zui ran tirelessly; the whites endured it worse. Tobias started pouring water on himself — when Zajdar saw it again, he cursed the aristocrat in three languages. When they passed a muddy river in the afternoon, only the nimrod, ares and Mr. Berbelek did not stop by it along with the warriors who were leading the humiya.

Zajdar brought the news that the rock formation that Hamis pointed out —an inclined prism in the middle of the plain — is just over the horizon. It was necessary to wait until dusk so that the nimrod could get closer and discern the exact position of the gang. N'Te assigned guards and men to look after the animals. Mr. Berbelek ordered us to empty our bowels. No fire, of course; no pipes or tobacco. He himself moved away from the circle of warriors. Sitting on a hot rock, he wrote in the rays of the dying sun: *If everything works out as it used to, if the morph agrees with the morph— will this constitute evidence of anything? What if I fail? — what will it prove? Can you really imitate someone else's Form so well? I am as much a son of the strategos Hieronim Berbelek as Abel; and we both desire the same thing. One of us will return from this jurja a winner.* The sun had set and he could no longer write. He returned among the people. Livius offered him watered down wine, and Parrot threw him an arfag. In the orange light of the moon, everyone seemed younger, thinner, their skin smoother. Hieronim watched Abel whispering to Zueia. What if Abel dies? He can die, regardless of the advantage he has, every battle is a potential massacre

on both sides. Yet I cannot forbid him, exposing himself to mortal danger is one of his rights and duties, this is the time for it, right now, youth. Hieronim sucked the arfag in silence.

As usual, no one noticed the nimrod's return.

"No guards. All under the western slope, thirteen of them. One fire. Most of the animals are tethered, a few hundred pous to the south. Keraunets on hand, probably charged. They just started eating."

Mr. Berbelek summoned Parrot and N'Te.

"Three branches: North, South and Reserve. We'll come straight ahead and within shooting distance. North and South through the arches and to the rock. Wait for the thunder. Then attack from both sides. The retreat is behind us. If someone breaks free, we take them with the keraunets. Then you, and to the animals. Don't finish them off. All your loot. Got it?

"Yes."

"That's it!"

They crept along again, bent to the ground, clearing the tall grass with their hands, with heavy keraunets on their backs, each with two. The golden savanna was right up to the rock itself, you'd have to shoot standing up. Mr. Berbelek saw the first glimmer of the robbers' fire in the darkness after a hundred steps, but they had to get much closer to count on such accuracy, even in the overlapping anthos of a nimrod and an ares. At least thanks to these anthos, everyone moved silently, no one stumbled, no one sneezed, no one dropped their weapons; and such things happen often. Though probably not to the N'Zui warriors.

Mr. Berbelek was already able to distinguish among the silhouettes of people gathered around a small fire under the rock, men and women (there were two women). He ordered them to stop. Now it was necessary to wait a quarter of an hour to be sure that the North and South had reached their positions. Hieronim deployed the shooters. He is in the middle, Zajdar and Abel on the left, Zueia and Livius on the right. He will assign targets to avoid wasting several bullets on one victim. Meanwhile, the reserve force stretched behind them into a wide horseshoe, the Buffalo Horns.

Mr. Berbelek raised his hand. The robbers ate, laughing and talking, and one went away to defecate. The gunners waited in a line; The N'Zui — crouched in the grass, as if petrified. Silence over the savannah. Fifteen, sixteen, seventeen, eighteen; All right. He raised the keraunet to his eye and squeezed the trigger. Thunder — and then four more. He immediately picked up the second keraunet, without even looking at whose target it was. The N'Zui's war cry — a long, animal roar that a civilized morph cannot produce — it was tearing the night apart. A rain of kurroi fell on the bandits from both sides, from behind the northern and southern cliffs. Nobody got up, nobody ran away. The N'Zui grew up around the fire as if from out of nowhere — raised shields, kurroi blades above shields. Mr. Berbelek waved his hand towards the rock. Picking up the first keraunet, he ran after the dispersed reserve unit.

As ordered, the wounded were not finished off. There were still four robbers alive, one of a black morph, one half-breed, two Aegyptians. The N'Zui stripped all possessions, weapons, clothes and decorations from the defeated, from the dead and the living alike. Mr. Berbelek ordered the four bleeding naked men to be carried to the rock wall. They moaned and cursed. The black man had a kurroi stuck in his stomach, his insides flowing out of the wound, which opened wider with each breath.

The N'Zui lit fires, brought the animals, celebrations began, singing, dancing and fighting for loot. On Hieronim's orders, N'Te sent four sentries into the savannah.

The whites gathered under the rock.

"What will we do with them?" Abel looked back at the groaning bandit. "This one won't live to see the dawn. Maybe if we took Mbula with us..."

"We should have finished them off immediately" the nimrod muttered.

"There are high rewards for some of them" said Mr. Berbelek. "The dead bodies won't last for a few months, but the living ones can be delivered."

Zueia laughed hoarsely.

"Their previous victims or the victims' families will pay even more, at least for their leader."

"Well, yes, but how can we identify them now?" Tobias sighed. "Do you

think they'll confess? When they find out about the situation, everyone will claim that he is the one called Kafar."

Mr. Berbelek nodded to Parrot.

"Explain to him" He pointed with his chin at the black robber "that if he introduces his friends to us, we will shorten his suffering. But if he lies to us, we can very easily extend it."

Then it turned out that Hojrik Kafar was indeed alive — it's one of the Aegyptians, the one with a shot through his left shoulder.

In addition, there was a reward for the mixed breed, Gucza Jaskółka.

Zueia knelt down next to the black man and placed her fingers against his neck. He stopped moaning, lost consciousness, and died.

It also turned out that Hojrik knew Greek perfectly (which was to be expected from an Aegyptian guard). No sooner had his gutted companion moaned their names than Hojrik began to insult and curse his would-be victims.

"You'd better contemplate your happiness in silence" Mr. Berbelek advised him. "You still have a few months to live."

"You think I won't escape from you?" Hojrik growled behind them, baring his crooked teeth and struggling in his bonds. "Do you think I won't escape those blind dogs of Hypatia? I ran away three times, I'll run away a fourth! You scavengers, you pestilential creatures! Not like you! You bastards will eat at my word, you bastard! I will sell your women, I will eat your children, I will burn you limb by limb! You won't escape from me anywhere, you won't hide anywhere! I know your names! Berbelek! Lotte! Amitace! Veronius! Latek! Rek! I know you! You'll never be safe! In a year, in two years, Hojrik Kafar will be at your door — bastards, bastards, I say — not like you! I remember! For the fourth time! Even if I had to bite my hand off!"

Mr. Berbelek turned around and cut his throat.

"He convinced me" he said in response to their astonished looks, carefully wiping the twisting blade of the Chaldean dagger.

THEY still had two weeks to go to the ruins of Marabratta, but in the meantime Africa offered a great abundance of natural game, it was easier to shoot a kudu than some incredible cacomorph. Three days after the incident with the kidnappers, Alithea hunted her first animal, a young tapalope. Neither Zajdar nor Zueia accompanied her, the shot was foul, and an N'Zui warrior had to finish off the tapalope with his kurroi. (Mr. Berbelek assigned warriors to each hunter who moved away from the caravan). All in all, it was very unsightly: a lot of blood, an ugly wound, the tapalope crawling out of her way somewhere into spiky bushes, its hind leg almost torn off, the hitting it with a hooked club, the swarms already flying onto the carcass sticky with red ichor, the suffocating stench.

In the evening they ate this tapalope. Alithea did not refuse the meat, but she did not seem proud of her first hunting success. Mr. Berbelek decided to ask Ihmet to take Alithea with him hunting for the next few days, in the hot anthos of a nimrod the girl will quickly lose her aversion to blood and the inherent abomination of murder, she will forget about the ideas typical of civilized people. About death.

"They say what noble entertainment!" Alithea grimaced, wiping grease from her mouth. "I just shoot and kill."

"Wait until you're facing the lion, the manticore."

"Then what?"

"If you miss, you'll die by yourself."

"So what if it's dangerous?"

"That's why they call it noble entertainment. Little people do not understand the pleasure of exposing themselves to mortal risk, overcoming their fear and weakness, and testing the limits of their skills. But aristocrats — that's why they are aristocrats."

Alithea continued to grimace. She wiped the fat from her breasts with the hem of a linen scarf.

"But this is so... disgusting. Pfuee!"

"It doesn't matter what it is; what matters is how you look. Everything that

is the most sublime arouses disgust in those who crawl in the dust and look from below: birth, death, love, victory. When a person comes into the world — have you seen this abomination of dirty physiology? When he leaves it — there are no flowers, no singing birds, no wonderful scents and no aurora in the sky, he doesn't leave with a smile on his face. When bodies come together — from the outside you see only bodies and what is corporeal. When you win — there is always the defeated one, the disgusting one whom you can no longer look at."

"Well, because I can't. What can I do, it's ugly?

"It is now; do you think cacomorphs die prettier?"

The first cacomorphs of the Skoliodoi were encountered over a week before reaching the Dry River. They had been noticing more and less subtle signs of flora deformation for a long time. In fact, Gauer Shebrek was the first to notice them. The Babylonian sophistes apparently had no heart for hunting, he was much more interested in the fauna and flora of Africa in its natural state, that is, alive and not demorphed by man. He went out into the savannah with books and a sketchbook in his saddlebags. When he returned in the evening, he found it full of various specimens — leaves, flowers, fruits — and a sketchbook full of drawings of things he couldn't take with him to his saddlebags. His six-fingered hands used coal with astonishing precision and delicacy of line. Around the fire in the circle of wagons, these drawings often passed from hand to hand, admired and commented on by everyone. Shebrek was not an artist who was ashamed of his works, in fact he denied any artistry. Alithea and Claudia begged him for their portraits; then a second and third — he sketched them every night. As a courtesy flirtation, Zenon bought them from the Babylonian for symbolic sums.

Gauer Shebrek wanted to write a book based on the observations he made during the Jurja — *The Imperfect botany in the light of the African Curvature*. Mr. Berbelek didn't really know what to think about him. If Shebrek really was the Seven-Fingers' spy, as Panatakis claimed, he would have acted no differently — expanding his legend as much as possible and at every opportunity talking about his alleged scientific fascinations.

— There are two main natural theories trying to describe and organize the world of living things: the so-called perfect and imperfect zoology and botany. Both are, of course, based on Aristotle's claims about the immutability of species and the Stagirite's definitional classifications. Perfectionists, however, assume that the pursuit of entelechy, a shape that maximally fulfills the purpose of

a given Substance, also applies to nature as such. Thus, although species, as realizations of finite Forms, are themselves unchanging, the number and type of species actually actualized change, from those less to more and more perfect. The works of teknitoi fauna and flora support these judgments, as indeed species are morphed always towards greater utility and not towards aimless chaos, for man is more perfect than everything he attracts to himself. Look at these sausage trees. They once reproduced by being pollinated by bats. Now this function was taken over by the efreets, morphed into something completely different; but as greater perfection was attainable, the Form was fulfilled. Or look at aloe. In Illeia's anthos, they transformed into varieties that are not only medicinal and pleasing to the eyes — look at these flowers, aren't they beautiful? — but also very nutritious. The natural teleology of the universe excludes the tendency towards chaos. But what do the perfectionists say: since all Forms, all species are predetermined and teknitoi simply shift the Substance from species to species, from under a Form to a Form closer to their anthos — this means that potentially, unactualized, there must also be species closer to chaos and empty hile. To some extent, this results from the Proof of Spontaneity itself from Theophrastus' treatise On Causes in the Plant World: since in the beginning there was only chaos of inanimate matter, and now life undoubtedly exists, then acts of spontaneous generation must occur: the living is born spontaneously from the dead. So whatever even the craziest teknites could morph — exists in potentiality. The question is whether it is possible to update such a "skewed" teleology, leading somewhere away from perfection, or even against it? Sophistae on both sides refer to classical writings, from Aristotle himself and Theophrastus, to Floren, Provega, Borelius and Ulricus the Physician. But perhaps this is one of those issues in which the Stagirite and his interpreters were wrong. Therefore, you should study nature carefully. Assign each plant and animal form to a genus proximus and define its differentia specifica, and orient it on the axis of perfection and purpose. If the reports of hunters and savages about the Skoliodoi demorphs were confirmed, it would be evidence that would be difficult for perfectionists to refute.

It is therefore not surprising that it was Shebrek, who scrupulously noted all observed aberrations in nature, who first found traces of the Crooked Morph. Small things at first: the color of leaves and bark of butter trees, wild bushes of coffee trees, flowers that repel insects instead of attracting them. Then he spotted a group of young date palms, a hundred feet high, bearing fruit not with bunches of yellow dates but with black gorilla heads. Some N'Zui climbed

up and threw them down to Shebrek. The resemblance to ape heads was not only external. After splitting the fruit, the brains were revealed, embedded in a brown, sticky goo. The Babylonian dipped his sixth finger into it, smelled it, touched it with the tip of his tongue.

— Sweet.

As they passed through an ancient baobab forest, Gauer had difficulty finding similar phenomena —A substance that has long ago achieved entelechy does not easily change morph — but then they left for the last plain separating them from Marabratta, and here the proximity of the Crooked Lands became much more visible, not only in the flora, but also in the fauna.

On the eighth of Sextilis the first cacomorph was hunted. He was killed by Esthlos Lotte's thunder. Zenon didn't even realize what he had shot until he approached the dead animal. An N'Zui rolled the lioness onto its back. It wasn't a lioness, the yellow, fleshy bulb of a wasps' nest was growing out of the animal's neck — they immediately swarmed and attacked the warrior and his Xewra. The warrior, who failed to escape, was later treated by Mbula Talon. Shebrek obtained the carcass by driving the insects out of the nest with smoke. Initially, he wanted to take the carcass to Alexandria (that is, the skin, the skeleton, and that nest; The N'Zui were skilled in such preparations of animals), but like Zenon, he concluded that in time much better specimens would come along.

Indeed, the next day, Ihmet Zajdar, who was searching the ruins of Marabratta, shot a two-headed cheetah. The cacomorph tried to escape extremely slowly. It was a female; three-headed cheetah fetuses fell out after the abdomen was cut open. The N'Zui interpreted this as a happy omen.

Setting up their camp, they placed the carcasses of the unborn cacomorphs impaled on stakes, on the east, south, west and north around it; they ate one. Mbula warned them about the poison of the Twist; unnecessarily, no one got sick.

Marabratta — this was apparently the name of this ancient kingdom, existing here thousands of years after the desertification of Sadara and the great migration east, to the Nile and to Babylon. All that remains of the kingdom are a few legends based on even older legends and ruins.

The Jurja reached them on the 11th of Sextilis. The easier part of the journey also ended here. The carts pulled by the chowols will travel several dozen stadia along the Dry River‘s bed, but then they will have to turn south, enter the jungle, where at best they will only be able to find paths wide enough for a single humiya. Mr. Berbelek had to decide whether to leave the wagons and some equipment with a dozen or so people here, in the ruins of Marabratta, or in the Sucha. He chose the ruins — at least they provided some kind of protection, more than one wall has survived from some buildings.

They set up camp between two large, fallen statues of cat people. The sculptures had something strangely irritating in their proportions — Hieronim couldn't decide whether they were symbols of a forgotten religion or perhaps realistic images of some primal, pre-human Form. He remembered the words of the Alexandrian taxodermist, the madness of Empedokles.

It was impossible to say where exactly the ruins ended, they were swallowed by the earth, covered with grass, and a sparse forest overtook them. After setting up camp, Mr. Berbelek went for a walk. This road was covered in tall blades of grass, wild flowers and thorny weeds. Crushed stone blocks the size of an elephant emerged from the greenery. Judging by the foundations, a tower with a triangular base collapsed here; that triangle dug into the ground as the remains of a well lining. Marabratta's form was apparently based on the number three. Mr. Berbelek measured the length and width of the stone blocks with a rectangle — a ratio of one to three.

The grass rustled. He looked back.

Gauer Shebrek, wearing a crooked hat and a sketchbook under his arm, jumped onto the weedy rubble. Bowing silently to Hieronim, he sat down on the top, opened a book and began to draw. Mr. Berbelek followed his gaze. The Babylonian was clearly drawing these two large, symmetrical pillars of the gate leading to some equally monumental building, of which, however, no trace remained, there were already spreading acacia trees, blackened with age, huge baobab trees and hievoi trees. — the gate was the entrance to the forest immersed in thick shadows. In Africa, evening and dawn last for a very short time. Soon everything will turn against the light and the gate will slam shut. The sun was already melting into the horizon beyond the rubble.

Mr. Berbelek climbed onto the stones, sat down next to the sophistes, and looked over his shoulder. Shebrek did not draw ruins, he drew a palace-fortress

immersed in the jungle, the gates were closed, their pillars were covered with gilded reliefs depicting fantastic creatures, a high fire burned above the gates. Mr. Berbelek strained his eyes. Indeed, the shadows on the surface of the columns formed suspiciously regular patterns.

"Have you been here before?"

Shebrek shook his head.

"Have you read anything about Marabratta?" Hieronim asked. "What language does this name 'Marabratta' come from?"

"There's nothing to read" replied the Babylonian, continuing to draw. "Nothing has been written. Maybe I'll write something. I haven't decided yet which legend to believe. Who lived here? Who ruled this kingdom? Who were these people?"

"Or maybe not humans yet, maybe something earlier" Mr. Berbelek muttered. "Did they have their own kratistos, or was the city founded in the three-storied anthos of their ruler?" He pointed to the triangular well, a trijunction of cobblestone streets. "Who knows, maybe there was a pre-Aegyptian sage thousands of years before Aristotles he guessed the truth about the nature of reality and did not teach his people methods of manipulating their own and other people's Form, carving keros — and then it was all forgotten, the knowledge perished along with the ancient civilization..."

Shebrek glanced at Mr. Berbelek and puffed out his cheek.

"Perhaps its creations have survived, perhaps what we take to be the natural order of things and the cosmic teleology of life, perhaps these are the works of such Marabratta teknitoi of flora and fauna...? Plants, animals. Us."

Light escaped from among the ruins like the sea at a sudden low tide. Mr. Berbelek could almost hear the sound of the black waves of night pouring into this place. Trees, bushes, grass, stones, the golden savanna in the north, the forest in the south, everything is drowning. The timbre of sounds also changes, because the music of the day is different and the music of darkness is different. A colorful bird flew down onto the rubble, opened its beak, and a screeching gurgle pierced the twilight. Other than that, silence; the camp is too far away, there is no echo of the evening bustle, no singing N'Zui, no snorting and roaring

of animals. There is no wind, so the plants are also silent. Silence is the form of all ruins, it is also a kind of stillness. It was getting darker and the Babylonian stopped drawing. He took off his hat. The stars and the crooked saber of the Moon appeared in the sky above the ancient city. Mr. Berbelek looked at the bird in their light, which was tearing its throat three boulders away from them. Instead of claws, the bird had monkey fingers, a tassel of golden grass grew from its tail, and its chameleon eyes turned in all directions, one independently of the other. At one point he looked at Mr. Berbelek, his eyes went still. Hieronim waved his rykte. Gurgling, the cacomorph rose above the ruins.

"We have reached the border."

"You'd better start writing down your dreams, Esthlos."

13 Sextilis. We stood over the Turtle. The kingdom of Crooked Form opens on the southern shore. The current is swift and the river is deep. We built rafts.The cacomorphia begins to affect people, during the night two N'Zui warriors became fused at the back, spines like spirals. The N'Te performed tribal rituals. I decide to withdraw the main camp several dozen stadia north, back into the jungle, the N'Zui will cut a path, here we will only set up an outpost near the ferry. Zajdar climbed to the top of the deformed balsam tree before dawn; he says he saw lights, there, deep in the Skoliodoi. Maybe it is actually a city. Shulima wants to go and see for herself. So of course me too; How could I refuse? We built rafts.

Mr. Berbelek was the first to set foot on the land of the Crooked Lands. He did not look back at the raft, at the N'Zui's oarsmen, at the turbulent surface of the Turtle River, at Shulima, Zueia, Zajdar, and Shebrek leaping after him onto the steep bank; he adjusted his backpack, waterskin and keraunet slung over his shoulder and, parting the bushes with his horse, entered the scoliotic jungle. Based on the night observations of the nimrod, the direction and distance were calculated: the supposed city of cacomorphs should be located about eighty stadiums south of the Turtle.

The river was named so because it was once teeming with pond turtles; now what crawled out of it onto the land were asymmetrical clumps of slime,

pebbles, and green muscle twisted from rotten seaweed. Some even had shells — made of black ice, melting in the sunlight — and a few paws each. Gravel brains rotated in their angular heads.

Mr. Berbelek set a strict time frame for the expedition: if they don't reach their destination within three days, they will turn back no matter what. Eighty stadia through the jungle, which is a challenge even on a flat surface. Almost all participants of the jurja expressed their desire to enter the country of the mysterious morph — only Veronius and Ap Rek did not turn out to be that interested — however, since N'Te flatly refused to send his warriors across the river, the expedition had to be limited to a reconnaissance of a few people. Only when they found a sure and safe route will they think about a mass crossing. Mr. Berbelek could have pressed the N'Zui directly, but he was urged not to try; Whatever success he achieved here would sooner or later cost him the loss of parts of his unit. The game was not worth the price, tribesmen had already started to precipitate, just as Esthle Amitace had predicted. Back in Marabratta, cacomorphia affected the cattle and humiyas, they did not want to eat, their hooves took root in the damp soil, they had to be driven onto stones at night. The horns of the chowols bent into strange sculptures overnight, Parrot told how the N'Zui were trying to read messages from the gods from their configuration; after all, the tribesmen themselves used to morph the horns of their cattle, their shape telling the form of the tribe or family. However, the long fur of the humiya began to sprout purple buds. As they traveled through the jungle towards The Turtle, they developed into asymmetrical flowers. At night, glowing insects exhaled by the snoring warriors would fly to them. One choked and died in its sleep; Mbula Talon then cut him open and took out its lungs — they shone with a blinding light that forced them to look away. Gauer Shebrek bought the lungs of the deceased from the One Who Bites for two drachmas. The whites didn't experience this kind of cacomorphia yet, their Form was stronger — but most of them were also aristocrats. Mr. Berbelek feared for Porte and Anton and the young people: Alithea, Claudia, Abel. It was mainly because of them that he ordered the jurja camp to be withdrawn from the banks of the Turtle River. In the meantime, let them hunt in the northern jungle, where there is a great abundance of various cacomorphs. — Livius has just killed a wooden monkey with snake legs — although, in fact, a keraunet is of little use in this thicket. Zajdar distributed spears, swords and knives to willing hunters. Here is the jurja: face to face with the beast, with trembling muscles, with blood on the blade, his or yours. Unless, of course,

the beast can't bleed; only splinters flew from the monkey. She had a hole in her back, and in that hole she carried a small obsidian statuette, a spiky egg. Tobias hid them in his saddlebags. It disappeared during the night, someone must have stolen it.

Mr. Berbelek walked through the Twisted Jungle with even, calm steps, looking at his feet, avoiding tree roots and liana nodes, trying to tread on the bare earth and stones. — which, however, is a legal impossibility in the jungle. He was immediately overtaken by his family: he will lead, the only one who will never lose track. It is true that Shebrek took a compass with him. Soon the sky was completely obscured by the tight roof of the jungle: tangled, dense, fused tree crowns and what took the place of trees here.Tortured keros twisted all forms. There was no longer any plant or animal that Hieronim could point to and say with certainty that it belonged to such and such a species, what its name was. When they crossed the Turtle River, they crossed the boundaries of language. We need to look for approximations in combinations, inversions and distortions of the known. For example: not a tree, but a woody muscle carved out of the ground for sixty pous, a limb of a giant buried under the jungle stretched towards the sky. Or: not a liana, but a twisting flame (and when touched it burns). Another liana — a taut vein in which dark goo pulsates. Yet another liana — a braid of human hair, stadium-long. Or: a bird with six wings. (Zajdar shot him. The bird fell; it immediately rose from the dead and dug itself under the trunk of a crocodile tree). Or: rooted boulders laying eggs. Shebrek never closed his sketchbook again.

For now, the cacomorphic predators somehow avoided them. Zajdar was in the front, Zueia in the back. As long as nothing fell straight out of the jungle, didn't jump from the side, didn't grab your leg, didn't reach out from under the ground... Well, don't think about it! You can recognize a victim the same way as a slave — they doesn't seem to stand out in any way, but just look at it and you'll know: this one will lose and this one will give up.

Shulima followed closely behind Hieronim, drawing level with him when the jungle allowed it.

"So it is just as you wanted, to be together into the depths of Skoliodoi."

She smiled slightly.

"And you did not?"

"You wanted me to."

"Poor you. What have I done with you? There were so many attractions waiting for you in Vodenburg and Val du Ploi."

He laughed loudly, causing the nimrod to look back at them. But Mr. Berbelek felt that, along with his laughter, he was expelling some soul phlegm, bad bile, spitting out old scabs, rotten blood into this dark jungle. Without slowing down, he pulled Shulima and kissed her. Was she resisting now? The thing is, he couldn't even remember it later, he didn't care about it — his former Form. Pulling away, he instinctively knocked a sand mosquito off her chest, which was already cutting through her brown skin and drawing blood.

They were all wearing narrow-legged shalwars and high-top shoes, jugras or similar. After just a few minutes, sweat was flowing down their torsos and backs. It attracted the Skoliodoi insects like honey to a bee; maybe they were also cacomorphed bees. They killed them as soon as they sat on the skin. Sometimes they were killed with a single tap, but sometimes they had to be crushed with great effort: snails with butterfly wings, dragonflies with iron bodies, spiders with ice bones. Shulima removed a black caterpillar with segments filled with air from Hieronim's neck — it glided through the air, curling into a bagel and unrolling. Maybe you should have covered yourself with a jacket, a thick shirt, or a linen blanket — but it was simply too hot, too damp and stuffy.

The further south you go, the greater the mixture of elements. Soon everyone was coughing, spitting out sand gathering in their mouths: glassy particles floated in the air, shining in the twilight — skin-cutting, hard fog. The air smelled and tasted of old burning. Visibility was getting worse. Water flowed down the trunks of demorphed trees, gushed from lianas, rose from hidden springs in spirals, carrying away stones, branches and small animals; it also rolled along the paths in drops as big as dogs: flattened balls of cloudy liquid, rummaging through the dark thicket, here and there, bouncing off obstacles, creeping out on slopes. Mr. Berbelek pierced one of them with his rykte. It hissed and spilled into a dirty puddle. It was Water, hydor, but not in Water Form. As for the Fire, they soon crossed another secret border of the Skoliodoi, and from then on most of the animals they saw had fur made of a million tiny flames, skins made of fire, armor made of lava, and glowed in the darkness with a daimonic glow. They could see these cacomorphs without any difficulty, especially when they flowed majestically over their heads through the suspension

of aeru, hydor and ge that played the role of air here. Sometimes one of them would suddenly take flight, jump or run — cap and caught the victim. One of the victims exploded like a siege mine, a rain of corpses fell on the hunters, and the stream of air between the cacomorphic trees burned green.

Soon the visibility dropped to twenty pous, you had to bite the air, your feet got stuck in the muddy mud, the jungle roared, crackled, thundered, clattered, roared, groaned, hissed, sobbed, she giggled and whispered unintelligible words. A great serpent made of water and fire passed them. Everything was mixed with everything, the boundaries were blurred, the world turned into one big cacomorphy.

"Rest!" Mr. Berbelek shouted.

They sat on the trunk of a copper fish. There was a fiery hippopotamus hanging under the crown of a gas palm, transparent stones dripping from its mouth, they had to slide on the trunk, and when they broke they exploded in snow that burned through the skin.

Gauer Shebrek started swearing when he realized that he couldn't take the stylus out of his hand, the stylus had become embedded in his bones, and the sophistes now had seven fingers on his right hand.

"Who else?"

Shulima walked along the trunk. Gauer also had something wrong with his ears, they were leaking sticky goo. Zueia's ribs rose above the skin, symmetrical crests of black glass. Zajdar couldn't take off his backpack, the straps were tangled with the muscles of his shoulders. Red flowers grew in his beard. When he noticed this, he wanted to curse, but he couldn't, it turned out that he had lost his voice. He wheezed — white feathers burst from his mouth, a shower of heavy fluff. The cloud rose immediately into the air, ten, twenty, thirty pous; there, on high, the breath of the nimrod burned on the belly of the hippopotamus. The hippopotamus yawned "tsztrkk!" snow fountains. Amitace, in turn, leaned over Berbelek, turned him around and told him to raise his hands. He expected the worst, but she couldn't find any aberration. She nodded silently. Finally, Shulima herself took off her equipment and clothes — she also stayed in Form for now.

"How long did we sew up?" Mr. Berbelek said to the nimrod.

Ihmet pointed on his fingers: fifteen.

“Fifteen stadidiots? That’s not bad.”

”I don’t know” Shulima raised her head. ”I think it’s already dry.”

“We sewed the whole shadow? Impossible.”

They reached into their backpacks for provisions. The dried fruit and crackers somehow held together, but the rest of the food changed shape and texture to a greater or lesser extent, and in some cases even gained a semblance of life: the smoked meat quivered when touched, the cakes sprouted prickly shoots. At least the water in the skins remained water.

”Yes man, we need some convincing here” Mr. Berbelek sighed.

”We’ll see tomorrow.”

They took turns watching, first Hieronim. This dense, polluted air made his eyes water. He didn’t want to wipe them with dirty hands, so the world he perceived completely lost its form, and in front of Mr. Berbelek there were only amorphous spots of dark colors, darker with every minute, until finally night flooded The Skoliodoi and from then on all the light came from the fire plants and animals.

Having woken up Shulima for her watch, Hieronim said:

”Those lights that the Talon’s champion saw —it doesn’t have to mean anything, you see.”

Amitace stood up and shook off the earth, the water, the fire, the living and the dead, everything that had crawled on her in her sleep.

”I believe that existence. If not a city, then something else, something much grander.”

”But why?”

She sat on the fish.

”Show me your memory.”

She pulled a black icicle from the stone and set it on fire from a snake running

nearby. Moving the dirty fire over the pergalon, she pointed to the Skoliodoi marked in red and ran her finger along the Turtle River.

"How long have we been snooping? We barely crossed the border. You see that with each event the demorphation is getting stronger and stronger, the keros is gradually warping, spreading from the river, or rather from those feeding cocamorphias in front of it. So look, count. If it grows like that — and we're just here — and this is the city, not much further — what is boring there — in the heart, in the center, in the core of the Skoliodoi?

"The Capital of the Crooked Lands? A bunch of crazy krastitosi?"

"Do you really think anyone could survive there?"

"I don't even ask about the splint; I ask, what is the maximum of this Curvature? What does it look like? What kind of world is this?"

"It's at least a mingle of The Turtle's stadidiots.

"Yes."

As he fell asleep, Mr. Berbelek tried to remember exactly when Shulima first mentioned the Skoliodoi and the jurja, what her words were and what the content of the invitation was. She needs the strategos Hieronim Berbelek, so she says, even if she has to raise him from the dead — but what does she need him for?To conquer the Skoliodoi?

He fell asleep. He dreamed what he always dreamed: being trapped in infinity, the pain of being divided, the rush towards something in his hand. — though of course he had no hands — getting lost in the midst of the unspeakable. But this time at least he remembered what he couldn't say; it stayed with him after he awoke.

In the morning they couldn't wake up Shebrek. The Babylonian had the penultimate watch; replaced by Zueia, who was still in Form, it must have hit him shortly before dawn. It took root and grew into the earth. It couldn't be dug out, they had to cut it off. Then he woke up — with a scream.

He was babbling nonsense, they didn't understand anything. Streams of sticky tears flowed from his ears. He could only walk backwards, someone had to guide him so he wouldn't fall and jump too high — he was very light, a

stronger push lifted him into the air. They forced him to eat a double portion, the fruit was supposed to weigh him down. He vomited boiling lava, which burned his chest and stomach. The skin first turned red, then began to glow. He scratched the burn with his coal finger — black writing on fire, the same gibberish.

Spewing fountains of feathers, Ihmet Zajdar pointed north. Mr. Berbelek waved his rykte.

15 Sexlitis, morning. This doesn't make sense. We're coming back.

In the jungle camp behind the Turtle, the Babylonian regained Form after less than a day. There were scars left on his hand, on his back, and on his chest, but any teknites soma can take care of those. At least it wasn't about them that he went to the jurja physician.

"Mbula, could you make a poison that would take effect and kill after ten days, and an antidote for it? Here, now. Could you?"

Shebrek's plan was as follows: poison Hojrik's bandits and send them to the city of cacomorphs. Let them come back and tell what they've seen; this would be the only way to save themselves. Five days there, five days back — they should make it. Let there finally be some use for these bandits, since we left them alive and watered and fed them. — at least it's good for Zofia. They had four prisoners in total: the two scouts and the two wounded from the main unit, including one for whose head there was a bounty, the Swallow. The second wounded man had a shattered hip which, in the absence of a teknites soma, would have taken the Talon himself several months to heal. So that left Hamis and his companion, Abu Hajan.

"Okay, but how can we be sure that they won't just sit across the river for a few days and come back and tell stories?" doubted Zenon.

Mr. Berbelek and Shulima exchanged glances.

"I wouldn't worry about that. Believe me, we will know if they are lying, if they went there or not."

Talon's poison was a black, foul-smelling goo. The demiurgos forcibly pushed fingers covered in it into the mouths, ears, anuses and through the navels into the insides of the two bandits. They kicked, spat and cursed. Shebrek explained the conditions, showed them Mbula's antidote, a map drawn on leather, and provisions. The N'Zui took them to Turtle River and brought them to the south bank.

This was the quietest week for Hieronim during the entire jurja. The jungle here was mostly a natural African jungle, cacomorphs in the flora — rare and never complete; animal cacomorphs were found more often, especially birds that flew freely from The Skoliodoi beyond the Turtle River. Charmed by this exceptionally impressive specimen, the girls decided to catch several such birds alive — they will take them to Alexandria, they will keep them in cages, there is no one like them in all of Aegypt. Mr. Berbelek mentioned that in Nebuchadnezzar's anthos nothing maintains its Form, the wilder it is, the faster it morphs towards the kratistos. But the girls were determined: let the cacorneons partially morph in captivity — there will always remain an image of a miracle. The N'Zui made great webs out of lianas. Claudia and Alithea disappeared into the jungle for days at a time, taking forty or fifty warriors with them, sometimes enlisting the help of the nimrod. Zajdar wandered through the jungle before and after dark, not really sleeping, or perhaps sleeping constantly, in some kind of hunting trance, always on the trail, seemingly focused on something else, not at all on what he was looking at with his never-blinking eyes. The Veroniuses hunted a large cacomorph of aeru and hydor, a fog beast that stretched between trees for several dozen pous, an air octopus sucking in, absorbing and digesting birds, insects and bats in flight. The octopus unfortunately vanished within hours of its death; but Shebrek managed to draw her, with the Veronius family standing proudly on her body.

Mr. Berbelek did not hunt much. He only went hunting when Shulima went. Or maybe Shulima only went hunting when he was hunting. At that moment it was difficult to judge between them, one Form was a reflection of the other, but which one? Even if they took Zueia with them — it was enough that he nodded and the slave girl disappeared from their eyes, now he was her master. He nodded, pulled Shulima, or she dragged him, into the green, into the red, into the shadow and twilight, into the hot thicket, and already hands on the body, tongue on the skin, wildness under the form of wilderness, jungle in the heart, claws, not nails, fangs, not teeth, not flesh, not body, animal, not man, hunger, not lust. Yes, yes, that's what she planned, that's what she promised

him — without words, without thought — even in Vodenburg, he believed it and received it: those green eyes looking only at him, those long fingers tightening on his arm, that light gold hair under his hand, those Alexandrian breasts under his lips, those smiling lips — not smiling, shouting obscenity under the morph of Hieronim Berbelek. In the cacomorphic jungle, on the border of The Skoliodoi. If there and then Esthle Amitace had conceived — what potential would materialize in her womb?

One day, Ihmet Zajdar downed an extremely impressive cacomorph: a humanoid silhouette, giant moth wings, a halo of black flames around a stone head, a tail of pure light, a colorful rainbow, trailing through the jungle half a stadium behind the beast. Only when Zajdar chopped off its head and the N'Zui dragged the carcass back to the camp did someone recognize the shreds of clothing and the iron amulet on the cacomorph's leg. it was Abu Hajan. Mr. Berbelek sent the nimrod to follow the bandit and find his companion, if he also returned from beyond the Turtle River. — because maybe he didn't have wings, he couldn't fly across the river, and the station at the ferry didn't report any attempts by the robbers to return. Zajdar appeared at dawn, dragging Hamis on a long cord. Hamis could not stand up, he walked with his hands. A large, curling horn of pulsating purple crystal glowed from his forehead, obviously very heavy, because the cacanthrope did not lift his head at all, but only turned it to the left, revealing his face covered with moss and the will-o'-the-wisps floating in his muddy eye sockets. He suffered from constant diarrhea, expelling phosphorescent shells, leaving a trail behind him, he left a trail behind him, after which the nimrod easily found him. From the shells emerged small dungy efreets; they floated in the air and circled around Hamis like a swarm of zarzas. He shooed them away with his horn, shaking his head. Mbula Talon rubbed the antidote into his body, but I don't think the cacanthrope even noticed. However, the Babylonian sophistes did not give up so easily. Binding Hamis to a tree, he began to question him, cracking a rykte to attract his attention. How far did they go? Has he seen the city? Who lives there? What did they look like? What did they say? What did they want? Has he seen the city? Mr Berbelek listened to these questions with interest; it is much more difficult to lie by asking than by answering, the Babylonian was betraying his true intentions here. After a while, Shebrek abandoned the rykte, he went to get a bull whip. While lashing the robber with his whip, he repeated his words. Speak! Speak! The N'Zui watched in silence. Hamis shook his head, banged his horn against the trunk, fires spun in his black eye sockets, the dung-efreets danced around him in tight

spirals. Cacological gibberish began to flow from a bleeding mouth: "It's a city, it's a hundred cities, and they live and have lived, in the grave, in the horrors, as I worshiped there and fought for them, they begged me from head to head, eat me up, as they suffered for me here, and here, and here, that no horror will arise, and in the foolishness, in my foolishness, what I hear, I do not make noise, that they toil, that they will scatter, embers on the bones, yes, yes, in all the evil, no one will survive, they will weed out, and what are you burying, the bad thing will turn into a scrap, a corpse, a scab, a grave, crunch, crunch-chrunch, cut, fight, feel, bite, poison, chew, chew me, chew me, chew!"

28th of Sextilis. I made the decision to return to Marabratta. We will go further west, where the Turtle crosses the open savannas and the Skoliodoi opens to the horizon. It would also be good to retreat to smooth keros for a while, but people have a hard time with this Twist, Alithea complained of nightmares. I'm not asking.

"A FAMILY hunt" muttered Abel, getting on his xewra. "Well, I wouldn't mind a tradition like that."

Alithea tied the hat strap under her chin. The sun had not yet risen, the frost was still sparkling on the golden grass, when the black-haired maiden came out of the tent in a thick jacket buttoned to the neck, jumped on the horse, put on a wide-winged hat and pulled on leather gloves. A pair of N'Zui trackers set off into the night without waiting for Mr. Berbelek's order. Hieronim nudged Ulga with his heels. Behind the riders trotted a dozen warriors, and at the end two humiyas laden with equipment — hunting can take longer than one day, maybe they will sleep somewhere on the savannah.

The rest of the camp slept, they rode out onto the dark plain in complete silence, each snort of the animal resounding like keraunet thunder; of course, no one said anything, silence is a form of hunting. They would have fallen asleep if it weren't for the cold biting their skin.

Mr. Berbelek was riding in an equally black kirouffa, the hood covered his face. Sometimes he slowed down, sometimes he rushed Ulga. As he passed them, he could freely look at his son and daughter. They both held themselves in the

saddles with the subconscious confidence of a nimrod's Form; their stirrups, in Herdonian fashion, were pulled up high, their legs were always bent, the reins were in their left hand, their right hand was free, so that they could reach for a keraunet at any moment. — just the day before yesterday, Abel shot, with a single round, a predatory cacomorph that attacked the grazing cows. The keraunets (two at each saddle, on the left, with the butt towards the Xewra's head) were always charged and with their hammers bent, they cleaned them diligently twice a day, even Alithea. Recently, Zenon Lotte took Alithea on a few hunts and he probably managed to infect her with hunting fever, or at least made her feel the heat. Anyway, she claimed she would shoot her first cacomorph today. As for Abel, after Zajdar he had the most cacomorphs to his name. Some of the most exotic creatures deposited in the Jurja carts belonged to him, or rather their remains (the flesh of the cacomorphs, rotting, smelt terribly).

As Mr. Berbelek was now ahead of his son, pursuing the hunters, he saw on Abel's chest, thrown over his shirt, an amulet made by N'Te from the bones of one of the beasts Abel had laid down. It shone coldly in the starlight: a tube of dry ice, inside which the white blood of the cacomorph is constantly boiling, not pouring out from any side. Abel claimed that it was enough to inhale the air with the smell of this blood (he put a tube to his nose, pinch the other nostril, tilt his head) to drive away all fatigue from the body and obtain a crystal purity of thoughts.

Thus, N'Zui's trackers, although usually used to find and flush out game in the absence of the nimrod, today were only tasked with leading the hunters to the place previously described by Zajdar. There was still half an hour until dawn when they rode in — Mr. Berbelek first — under the roots of the aer-fig trees, gathered in this grove half a stadium from the northern bank of the Turtle River, which flows through the savannah in a wide, shallow bed. The skoliotic figs floated in the air ten or fifteen pous above the ground. However, their roots reached it, with cup-shaped canopies spreading under the trunks. When a stronger wind blew over the savannah, the entire grove moved several stadia back and forth, and the limp shoots tried to sink into the soil again each time. This is probably how the aer-figs came here from the Crooked Lands.

The hunters and the animals hid under the roots of the cacomorphic trees, Hieronim, Abel and Alithea under the southernmost one. They sat down on the loose, cold ground, prepared the keraunettes, Mr. Berbelek cleaned the lenses of

the binoculars, Abel opened a bottle of "bitter gold", offered some to his father and sister, Alithea put her hat under her heels... Then there was only stillness and silence, nothing more left for them to do, nothing more to say. They were waiting for the sunrise.

That this silence would be forced, artificial, somehow awkward; but no, it belonged to the form of the moment, and it was good form. Mr. Berbelek remembered the gentle whisper of the aer-fig leaves above his head, the crackling of its roots, the single, the loud fart of a humiya, the smell of the earth, the taste of cold moisture as he picked a golden blade and put it into his mouth, the monumental darkness of the African sky — and the close presence of the son and daughter waiting calmly, their presence, like another color, sound, smell, and yet not a color, not a sound and not a smell, but nevertheless a direct sensory experience: Abel, Alithea — here and here, under the wings of my anthos.

A red light burst on the horizon to Mr. Berbelek's left. First, a horizontal line of blood, then a streak of pink, rising higher and higher into the stars and extinguishing subsequent constellations, and finally a horizontal wave of fire that made the entire savannah shake and sway, breaking with a crack into two: light and shadow. Suddenly everything was filled with shadows; the hunters under the aer-fig tree found themselves in the deepest shadow. A timid noise passed over the plain, the wind rose, the trees trembled. A god was rising from the grave. First step; second step; third step; head raised. The last star disappeared, a dark blue flooded the sky, a harsh light pierced the eyes of everything that lived and had eyes. Day dawned over Africa.

Mr. Berbelek, with binoculars at his eye, was leaning forward among the roots. Abel held out his hand to his sister with a bottle of "bitter gold." She shook her head. She took off her gloves and unbuttoned her jacket.

Mr. Berbelek put down the binoculars and grabbed the keraunet. It was the signal; they grabbed their keraunets and knelt down next to their father.

They appeared on the southern horizon, standing out against the background in a bright purple color. They must have flown very quickly, in less than a minute it was possible to distinguish individual silhouettes. Mr. Berbelek counted them with his naked eye: two, four, five.

"Second from the right, the largest" he said.

they were all supposed to shoot at the same thing; it was not certain whether it would die from three or six bullets.

As they descended above the Turtle, preparing to land on the north shore, in a gentle sandy bend — as the nimrod said they would do, this is their watering hole — Mr. Berbelek put the keraunet to his cheek and squeezed the trigger. Thunder. Second thunder, third. He was already reaching for the spare keraunet. The victim thrashed just above the ground, and the remaining four cacomorphs took to the sky in panic and flew back south. Thunder, thunder, thunder. Alithea coughed from the pyros smoke. Abel handed her the bottle; now she had accepted it. The N'Zui, screaming, rushed towards the Turtle, shields and kurroi raised. Mr. Berbelek slowly followed their trail, Abel and Alithea quickly overtook him.

The warriors danced around the monster scuttling in the shallows of the river, stabbing it with kurroi, beating it with kurrotes, leaping away and leaping again; but he didn't want it to die. It was almost fifty pous long and must have weighed over a hundred lithos. The head of a woman, the torso of a jackal, the wings of a bat, the paws (a dozen or so paws) of a crocodile, a monkey, a spider, a cheetah, a tail - not a tail, a large bunch of ferns, a chain of quartz rocks on the back, gray termites on the shoulders, lianas in the hair; and all this multiplied by ten and furiously purple. The cacomorph thrashed the water so furiously that soon no one was left dry. It caught one of the warriors with his wing, sending him flying twenty pous into the air. It opened its gigantic red mouth and started moaning, eeuuuiiiiii, eeuuuiiiiiiiiiii, it was impossible to bear it, when he turned his back for a moment, Mr. Berbelek jumped and stabbed the cacomorph with a Chaldean dagger in one of its hind legs. The beast probably didn't feel it at all. However, after just a dozen or so seconds, it noticeably slowed down and weakened, its wings fell to the water's surface, it became silent, stopped kicking, and finally lowered its head and became still. The N'Zui howled, beating the kurroi rhythmically against their shields.

Mr. Berbelek climbed onto the bank and took off his soaked kirouffa. The sun hugged his back and he sighed, stretching.

"I'd like something to eat."

Animals were brought, poles were driven into the ground and a primitive tent was erected. The hunters sat down on a Persian carpet. Alithea, taking off her coat and letting her hair down, stretched out on her side and enjoyed

honey pancakes and sugared muffins in the Greek style. Mr. Berbelek and Abel watched the N'Zui try new ways to bring the giant carcass to shore. Several canine cacomorphs — locust wings folded along their muddy sides — they looked at it from the other bank, sitting on its haunches and sticking out its snow-white tongue. Mr. Berbelek opened a bottle of wine. Alithea began humming something under her breath, a two-syllable mumble, tapping her glass against the bowl of fruit in time. Abel joined in, clicking his tongue against the roof of his mouth. Hieronim took out a pipe, filled it, and lit it. He lay on his back, resting his head on one of the stakes; the bowl rested on his chest, warming him under his heart. A skoliotic butterfly flew into a stream of pipe smoke, flapped all three wings in panic, and fell dead onto the carpet. Mr. Berbelek took the insect between two fingers, lifted it and squinted. The light was passing through its wings in a strange way —

"What is this? Hey, dad, where did you hide the binoculars?"

Abel stood up, held the given opticum to his eye, and turned to the west.

At first everyone thought it was one of the slain cacomorph's relatives returning, but the shape in the sky was yellow, not purple, and had sharp, straight edges. Ten, fifteen stadia?— without knowing the creature's actual size, it was difficult to determine the distance. Strangely enough, it didn't seem to be moving at all, it was stuck at the same point in the sky, as if bolted to the blue. Having loaded the keraunetes and summoned six warriors, they mounted their xewras and set out along the Turtle River, following the course of its waters and the rays of the Sun. The binoculars were returned to Mr. Berbelek and, after a few minutes, they stopped again and noticed the long, straight tail of the cacomorph reaching to the ground. But a few stadia away it was already clear to the naked eye that it was not a cacomorph, it was not a living creature at all. — but a gigantic kite, soaring on a tether that disappears behind a hill thickly covered with palm trees. At the same time, they saw silhouettes of people and animals between the palm trees. The riders had the sun behind them and remained unnoticed.

Mr. Berbelek then ordered the horse to stop, dismounted, placed Ulga in the grass, Abel and Alithea pulled their mounts to the ground. The binoculars passed from hand to hand. More bandits? It didn't seem likely, not here, on the borders of Skoliodoi; So what would they need this kite for? Probably just another jurja. Send the N'Zui to scout? They had their porters, and there

were the most black people hanging around among the palm trees. However, Mr. Berbelek also saw white people wearing identical, dark trousers and jackets, even in this heat with their high collars buttoned to the last button.

He gave the binoculars to Abel.

"Stay back two stadia. Watch for me. If I don't come back, go get Zajdar and Esthle Amitace, gather all the N'Zui."

Abel and Alithea exchanged glances.

"What if —"

Mr. Berbelek raised his hand. Nothing more was said. He put on his black kirouffa without buttoning it, but put the hood over his head. He tugged on Ulga's bit, pulled her to her feet and jumped into the saddle.

The walk started; he didn't look back to see if they had obeyed. He didn't look away from the camp under the palm trees. When he noticed a sudden increase in traffic, he stopped the xewra. He waited. Theoretically they could shoot him now, but he knew they wouldn't do it, because they assumed that the only reason he went out into the middle of the field like a herald sent from army to army was because there was actually an army behind him, a force at least equal to theirs; this was Mr. Berbelek's form of behavior. He waited calmly, occasionally patting Ulga's green neck.

Ten, fifteen minutes, that's how long it took, before a man dressed in black, riding a red-maned gray haired xewra, rode towards him from the palm trees. Black to black — as they met under the zenith-high sun, the shadows coalesced with a soft click. The man had red hair, a thick beard, and a wide nose. For a jurja participant, he was definitely too pale, as if he had been hiding under a tent or in a cart the whole time. Middle age, straight back, an amulet with a cross on his chest — Kristian. Judging by the morph, he was born in Herdon. Not an aristocrat, but definitely from the upper classes.

He hit the Xewra on the left side.

Mr. Berbelek took off his hood.

"Esthlos Hieronim Berbelek" he said, raising his hand in greeting, the Locust's ring flashing in the sun.

The Herdonian bowed in his saddle.

"Theophilus Agusto, White Jerusalem, sophistes of the Royal Academy of the New Rome.

Mr. Berbelek pointed to the sky behind the sophistes.

"We took it for cacomorphs" he said, quickly using the plural form. "We just shot one. Is this bait?

Agusto looked over his shoulder, as if surprised to see the kite himself.

"No. Are you leading a jurja, Esthlos? We don't hunt anything. Unless, of course, it's necessary."

"So?"

"Ah. We want to look as far as possible into the Curvature."

Mr. Berbelek looked up at the kite again.

"Did you attach a man to this?"

"Yes, a doulos with exceptionally good eyesight."

"How does he give you information?"

"He'll tell you everything when we get him. Besides, he's drawing a map there now."

"Maybe the map will survive."

"We've worked everything out carefully, Esthlos. The kite is made of aeru wood, you may have seen them circling the plain here in groves..."

"Yes".

"So it doesn't need the wind to stay up. The trick is to avoid a sudden gust when taking down and releasing the kite. But we have two weather demiurgoi among us."

"Wouldn't it be easier to use an air pig?"

"We have received a promise from King Gustav that he will finance insurance

or purchase of an aerostat if this expedition yields concrete results. We landed on the Tooth Coast two months ago and are moving east along the Turtle River. If you have any information about the lands south of the river and the nature of their cacomorphy, we would be most grateful, Esthlos, if you could share it.“

“Why don’t you go there yourselves?”

The sophistes blinked in surprise.

“You must be joking, Esthlos.”

“Who am I joking?”

“This is a sick land. I wouldn’t dare go even a few steps into the Twist. We don’t even spend the night near the river, we return to the wagons north every evening.“

Mr. Berbelek made a gesture of unclear meaning with his left hand, gasped and exhaled.

”If you’re strong enough... Besides, it’s a safe, open area here, you can quickly cover many stadia, and the Curvature doesn’t have as much support in nature as further east, in the jungle. But even in the jungle you can easily enter ten stadia.”

The sophistes was silent for a long moment.

“You went in, Esthlos” he finally whispered, without looking at Mr. Berbelek.

”Me and others.”

”Do you even know what this is?”

”Do you know?”

”No. But we fear the worst. King Gustav sent us because Kratistos Anaxegiros himself is concerned.

”This the worst — what is this?

Theopilius Agusto looked Mr. Berbelek straight in the eyes.

”What makes the world the way it is? What makes stones stones, water

water, a horse a horse, a man a man? Form, the Form that organizes Matter into specific Substances. If it were not for the morph, there would only be a homogeneous mud in an unmade ball, an infinite swamp of an infinite universe. But where is the potency of a given Substance written before it becomes a Substance at all? What must the teknites of the body change when it changes the form of a bald man into the form of a curly-haired brunette, having embraced this man only once with his anthos? What are these forces that form the Forms? We call this default level of reality keros, wax, because each morph imprints itself on it like a seal, but none permanently and none can change the nature of the keros itself. But what would happen if keros was destroyed? Can you imagine it, Esthlos? It wouldn't even be the end of the world; the end of the world also has its Form. This cannot be imagined at all, because it is the death of all Form. Do you understand what you risk by entering Skoliodoi? Not health, not life, not body, not soul. You can lose all this and still remain Esthlos Berbelek: sick, dead, incorporeal, soulless. But when your keros breaks... It will not be possible to truthfully make any statement about Hieronim Berbelek, even the fact that Hieronim Berbelek no longer exists."

Abel woke up that morning with a premonition of a miracle filling his memories of late night dreams. Hot energy flowed through his veins, not blood, but streams of small lightning bolts, tickling his muscles and skin from the inside. Today he will lead the hunt, today he will set out, today he will decide!

He shaved hastily by the stream (it was during the jurja that the first stubble appeared on his face, and since no teknites of his body had ever morphed his skin to eternal smoothness, he had to quickly master the art of using a sharp blade on his own throat, which was alien to aristocrats). He returned to his tent and put on a leather shalwar, high jugras, and wrapped a trouffa around his head. He fastened the Gothic kanjar to his belt, took a deep breath and went outside the tent.

"Parrot!"

He knew no one could stop him: Zajdar did not return from the hunt with Marcus, Justina and Claudia Veronius, his father disappeared for several days with Shulima, Livius slept off the night after the Turtle. Esthlos Ap Rek and Gauer Shebrek will only grumble for a moment and wave their fingers in warning.

"A dozen warriors, three humiyas, supplies for five days, now, now, now!" he growled at Parrot as soon as he ran from the carts.

Just leave the camp as soon as possible, Abel calculated; then I'll be the only white, and since there's no N'Te, it shouldn't be a problem to keep them line. Take the translator with you?

No, the deal is that he always stays in the camp; then they can complain that because of me -

"Where are you going again?"

Alithea!

"Oh, come on, you won't cause me any problems —what, will you go and complain to father?

But his sister, still wet from her morning bath, having only wrapped a light cotton towel around her hips and twisting her long hair over her shoulder, looked at Abel in silence, with an ironic smile on her lips, her left eyebrow slightly raised. — and he already knew he wouldn't break this form.

"Alright" He sighed " But you only have fifteen minutes, get Anton. Get dressed and jump on a xewra."

She kissed him on the cheek and ran to her tent.

He looked behind her, running — the white fabric stuck to her wet legs, she tripped over a stone, waved her arms and shouted at the servant, she disappeared behind the tent wall— and for a second he was blinded by the vision of the near future: Alithea with her eyes wide with fear, Alithea whom I cannot help, Alithea torn apart by a cacomorph, a victim of my helplessness, here I bring her massacred body to the camp and lay it before our father. His blood rushed to his head and he had to shake his head like a stunned bull. No, no, it won't happen. There's no turning back anyway, she won't listen to me.

What am I even thinking about? Such considerations are a prayer for failure.

They left on time, he didn't have to wait for his sister. There was no dramatic struggle of will for which he was mentally preparing. He waved his hand and pointed in the direction — and they set off without a word. No one was sur-

prised, no one asked anything; just another hunt. It was, of course, the greatest victory, a triumph of the imposed form so indisputable that no one even noticed — nevertheless, Abel felt somewhat unsatisfied.

They immediately turned towards the Turtle River, towards the ford. After an hour they were already on the Skoliodoi savanna, the blades of Twisted grass reached higher than xewra's chest, the N'Zui were almost completely lost in them.

Abel cleverly took his bamboo rykte with him — now he nudged the shoulder of the nearest warrior and pointed south, raising his left hand with four fingers straight. The N'Zui exchanged a few shrill cries and four scouts fled into the Crooked Lands. — after a while they become visible only as short ripples on the surface of a sea of grass.

Alithea adjusted her hat. She squinted at the sky.

"Those clouds that come from Skoliodoi... Do you think it will rain again?"

A week ago, scoliotic rain fell on the northern savannah — washed hair from the skin, eyes from the sockets, the right angles from wooden and stone objects, white from everything that was white. — and Alithea and Claudia didn't have time to protect the cacorneon cages from it, and as a result, one third of the captured miracle birds died. Abel wondered how Crooked Hamis endured the rain. His father handed it over to the Herdonian sophistes — when it turned out that the cacanthrope did not return to its human form over time, there was no point in keeping it any longer. Despite everything, Abel found this decision somewhat unfair "but he's our prisoner!" but he couldn't point out who this was unfair to.

"Have you seen Zenon? I lent him my copies of the maps yesterday; today he went somewhere before dawn."

Alithea shrugged. She leaned over the xewra's neck, placing roasted honeydews in her right hand.

"How should I know where he is?"

"Ha, don't play the good girl here!" Abel laughed. "A beautiful aresik on the other side of Africa, so let's go"

"Pig."

"Whore."

"Shitty Zarzojad".

"Szlejwa."

She spat at him; he knocked her hat off her head with the rykte, she caught it at the last moment.

"I overheard them" she said after a while.

"Who?"

"Well, father and Shulima. When was it... on Dies Jupiter. Remember, they used to dance to the drums of the N'Zui. I heard their conversation in her tent. They went to sleep and I didn't understand everything... But it sounded like she wanted to rent him. He asked about the price. She was laughing, but it was serious, I know."

"Rent? For what?"

"For a strategos."

Abel looked at her in surprise.

"You've got something mixed up. What kind of army would he command?"

"I heard." Alithea pursed her lips. "He asked about it too. She was "The greatest." And then she laughed. But it was serious, I know, I know her."

"You're confused" he repeated. "What does "the greatest" mean? They were bantering and you —"

A roar and a blur of red, no shape at all, just a sense of color and movement, Abel didn't have time to turn his head — then you fall, from among the golden grasses, from the stone crouch, a released spring, forward and upward, straight towards Alithea —rrrrraaargr! The girl's xewra kicked with a squeal, trying to both jump away and turn to her attacker's hindquarters — she didn't succeed, but at least she knocked Alithea off the saddle and the cacomorph fell onto the horse's empty back. Now he froze for a split second, Abel focused his eyes

on it — What is this? What form is this? Where is the head, where is the body, what is it made of? The other froze to cling tighter to the xewra: either it already had these paws, or it just developed them, or it had these claws, or did it just grow red hooks of horny tissue, trrrrrraktch! — into the sides of the xewra, thrashing helplessly and neighing terribly, under the ribs, deep inside, the prickly red crushes the bones and entrails, the spine of the mount, which falls to the ground broken in half, fountains of blood and shreds of meat gushing out all around. Abel got hit in the face with hard cartilage, which sobered him up. Where's Alithea? He didn't see her. He yelled at the N'Zui, not even a word— a contentless battle cry, an empty form of aggression. He pulled out the keraunet and shot almost flat, the muzzle of the long barrel no more than half a shot away from the red mass. The sound of thunder caught the cacomorph's attention. There was another moment of stillness, and then - tsztrrrr, red stalagmites shoot out from inside its smooth shape: scabs-combs, scabs-teeth, scabs-needles, scabs-horns, scabs-blades. It's going to jump on me, Abel thought, and kill me. He jerked his head and grabbed his kanjar. He won't kill me! Respect to Esthlos Abel Berbelek! Hieronim's son! The kurroi fell into and out of the monster, the black body sealing itself together without a trace, like the barely disturbed surface of a lake. I know what this cacomorph is, Abel thought, I know: Blood. Blood in the Form of a Predator. The cacomorph roared a second time and leapt at Abel, two dozen scabs bristling on one man. Abel kicked the xewra with his heels and closed his hand around the head of the iron cobra. He still had time to see Alithea rising behind the cacomorph and the black string of her scarf wrapping twice around the red body, cutting the surface of the Blood. — He raised the kanjar, the curved blade flashing in the sun — before the great horn-scab entered his body, a dull pile of pain, tearing his intestines, bursting his pelvis, before the roaring Blood fell on Abel, a heavy mass of liquid rot. — and stick the kanjar into it, once, once, once! — as long as the hand obeys the will, as long as there is light in the eyes, as long as there is breath in the chest, as long as he still hears that roar "rrrrraaaaaaaaaargr!"

Esthlos Abel Latek died in the Skoliodoi, in the Crooked Lands beyond the Turtle River, 17 Septembrisa 1194 PUR. Seventeen Years old, second challenge. Respect!

ι

Like a Father

18 Septembris

We returned to camp. Abel was torn apart by a cacomorph, unconscious. Mbula says he will die. Alithea does not leave his tent. The N'Zui beat the drums, a night of lights and noise. I went out into the savannah. I know he will die.

19 Septembris

Still alive. Mbula sleeps, Alithea sleeps. I was sitting next to him (stupidity). His stomach is ripped open, his spine is crushed, his legs are broken, his face is torn, his left arm is only attached to his skin. In the arteries there is blood instead of air, an ant pulse. Lots of phlegm and black bile, bad. The quaternaries tremble from it. According to Mbula, he must have a very strong morph, since he is still unconscious and alive. If he regains consciousness, if the soul returns, the will presses on the Form, the body is just a vile Matter, and the demiurgos will keep it afloat until we reach some teknites soma. It has a very strong morph, the blood of aristocrats. If he regained consciousness. What gibberish.

19 Septembris, afternoon

Alithea's crying at Shulima's. She seems to have a sense of guilt. Parrot inter-

rogated the N'Zui, whom Abel took for this hunt (seven survived). It was Alithea who pulled the cacomorph away from Abel, cut him with this rukata, the cacomorph was drowned from the liquid, from the blood of the victims, which was covered by some wild Form. It clotted and melted, it could at most be splashed, but not killed. The kids never had a chance. It was inevitable.

19 Septembris, night

So what exactly is this Crookedness? The breaking point of the keros, from which cracks spread across it, shattering all Form, as the Herdonians fear? Zajdar left with the Veroniuses. Zajdar reminded me of Al-Kaba: The Black Stone, Al-Hajar Al-Aswad, is also a dead object, a place — and affects all surrounding Forms. They say it fell from the sky. I have to write, I can't sleep. Alithea is sitting in front of the tent, feeding her birds, turning a Pythagorean cube furiously. What if she dies too? This is the end of the jurja, there will be no more hunting, I will order you to return to Aegypt as soon as possible. The moon swells in the sky. I cannot sleep.

20 Septembris

Still alive.

20 Septembris, noon

Still alive. Mbula tasted his blood, says it could be an infection, that the cacomorph's blood, the blood of Blood, mixed with it, and now two morphs are fighting in Abel, a human and a Twist. I don't understand. What does all this mean? There is no such medicine. Maybe we should move away from The Skoliodoi, back to the smooth keros — but I'm afraid to move Abel.

20 Septembris, still

Shulima apologized to me, the next one who thinks it's her fault. The megalomania of misfortune is probably some kind of fashion.

20 Septembris, north

Anton woke me up. Abel regained consciousness. I stand in front of the tent, moans, the shadow of Talon. Alithea is running.

21 Septembris, south

We fell asleep next to him, Alithea with her head on my chest, I can't feel my left arm. Mbula says it will be fine. The N'Zui made noise all night again, and Abel fell asleep at dawn. He recognized us, his speech was slurred, but he wasn't delirious, his head was fine, he wasn't crazy, his body was still intact. It'll be all right.

21 Septembris, evening

Long conversation, now Mbula is feeding him. He's getting better, he'll recover. The others left and we talked quietly. He started, of course, with self-accusations. This is bad form, especially now; I convinced him. What is the greatest triumph? Don't run away when death is in front of you. Sometimes you can spit in her face and walk away, and sometimes you have to pay the full price; but we're not running away. In such fire the true Form burns out. He understood it. (Now I wonder: I lied? I cheated? Was Kolenica really my greatest triumph?) I knew he had been waiting for these words. After all, I was exactly like him, youth cannot be completely forgotten, until death we miss this imperfection, this time of great potential. He wanted to hold my hand, but he couldn't yet. I shook his hand, I think he felt it. He didn't cry at all. He is strong, yes. Mbula says the pain must be great. So to say: the future, Alexandria, and let me buy them this house, move where he will recover faster than in Nebuchadnezzar's anthos? Some clumsy jokes (but he can't laugh yet), stories about Alexandrian romances, he's making it up or not, what's the difference, he's fine now, things will get better. As soon as Mbula allows, we're going back north. The best teknitoi in Aegypt — half a year and no trace will remain. So I became the Duke of Kolenica and defeated the Warlock. Ha. I have a wonderful son. Alithea makes me dance. But I'm tired.

24 Septembris

He would have rotted on the way to Alexandria, we buried him in the savannah

of the Turtle River.

III

$\triangle$.
Shulima Amitace

THE edge of the sun's disk touched the edge of the Old City wall. The wiktyka finally broke free from the traffic jam on the Canopian Route and turned onto the northern crossroads. She stopped in front of a narrow building with a damaged façade. Mr. Berbelek and Aneis Panatakis got off here; the factor motioned to the wiktyka to wait a little longer. He knocked vigorously on the main door.

Almost immediately it was opened by an old slave woman with two small children clinging to her skirt. She was shouting in Pahlavi at someone down the shadowy corridor, and Aneis had to get her attention with a sharp clap. Only then did she look back at the guests, bow and open the door wider. They came in. The slave girl ran into the house, still screaming, now clearly calling for someone. Mr. Berbelek looked at the factor questioningly; he waited, mechanically tugging at his beard. From the open passages into the rooms on the left and right, doulos, servants and children peeped out from time to time. A stately tabby cat walked down the cluttered corridor; After hissing at Mr. Berbelek, he slipped out through the open door and into the street.

An elderly Aegyptian woman in a black robe and a gray skirt came down the stairs from the landing. The flour-covered woman stopped her for a moment, and the Aegyptian sent her away with a shake of her head. She had gray hair, which was extremely rare in Alexandria.

"Esthlos. Aneis" She bowed to Mr. Berbelek, Aneis gave him a cold look.

"Then I'll go" said Panatakis hastily and fled to the waiting wiktyka

They looked back at him and watched him drive away. Meanwhile, the cat returned and, with a long purr, began to rub against the Aegyptian woman's legs. Somewhere at the back of the house, honey soup was being cooked, the smell flowed in a rising wave, and Hieronim felt saliva come to his mouth. He swallowed and transferred the rykte to his left hand.

"Athena Ratschut" she began, looking down at the cat, but Mr. Berbelek interrupted her, saying in a quiet voice:

"I know, Aneis told me everything. That you were a student of Antidektes. I hope Aneis didn't pressure you, he doesn't know the difference between a request and blackmail."

"Every request is blackmail" she muttered absently, looking back into the dimness of the house. A child was crying and someone was playing the flute.

Sighing, she pushed the cat away with her foot and straightened her long skirt.

"Actually, we should go, the sun is almost down, he's getting up soon. Please."

They left. She closed the door behind them. Mr. Berbelek wrapped himself tightly in his black kirouffa and pulled up the hood. He hit the nearest passer-by with the rykte and blocked the path of the next one — so they joined the stream of pedestrians flowing through Alexandria's old Jewish quarter.

"Maybe it would be better to take a wiktyka after all."

She shook her head.

"There's no point, it's nearby, by the sea wall"

They walked in silence for a while. The many amulets and memorial stones that hung around her rattled and jingled with every step Athena took. She had a lyngourion on her forehead — what diseases does a lyngourion treat?

When she was hit by a dirty nude running against the street, Mr. Berbelek offered her his arm.

“He told you that I was engaged in philonecra, right, Esthlos?” she muttered.

Mr. Berbelek did not answer.

”I know you lost your son there. If you intend to —”

”No” he growled.

”That’s good. That’s good. Once the soul leaves the body, one can only impose animal forms on it: eats to eat, breathes to breathe, lasts to last. It’s the same with automatons.”

Mr. Berbelek now looked at the gray-haired Aegyptian with cold anger.

”Now that you’ve brought up the topic of prices” he muttered ”I’d like to hear what you think about Olog’s speculations. Have you read yesterday’s ”Geras”? You tried to build such a keromaton, there is no point in denying it.”

”Over twenty years ago.”

”It does not matter. Someone else could have succeeded. Now we have the Skoliodoi.”

She shook her head, the amulets jingling.

”No, no, that’s impossible. You don’t understand, Esthlos. Olog writes nonsense. How could a keromaton cause such a thing? It only had one simple function: generating a planned aura. This was Vaika the Axumean’s idea: a dead object with a living anthos. A mechanism for pressing keros. Elking writes that the lunar aether smiths can forge it directly into the keros. Don’t you see, Esthlos, that eating is the opposite of necromancy? Think about the mass production of kalokagenic keromatons, beauty and health clocks.” With each sentence, Athena became more and more excited, a blush appeared on her face, she straightened up, and started playing with a lock of gray hair with her left hand. ”Don’t you see, in every house, in every room, by every bed, one such keromaton, as if everyone had their own private kratistos, whose anthos could be fashioned as they pleased, much stronger than the anthos of Nebuchadnezzar, for the poor and for the rich, for the strong and the weak, for the aristocracy and the people, health, beauty, wisdom—”

”Why you murdered a baby.”

The energy drained from her and she became silent.

When she spoke again after a while, it was almost in a whisper; for which, for the first time, a trace of bitter anger appeared in her voice:

"This is the nature of reality. Only fools are angry that the sun rises in the east and sets in the west. Where can we get the power to change an alien Form that has already achieved entelechia and its entire potency has been realized? A keromaton must make Substance unfulfilled, young and malleable again. What is mostly just hot potentiality? Plant seeds. Even more — eggs. Even more — a puppy. Even more — animal and human fetuses, infants, doulos children. Even more — the children of aristocrats."

"They should have torn you apart with horses."

"Do you really think, Esthlos, that Vaika was cursed because of these babies and not because the keromaton is a machine of free democracy?"

"What does politics have to do with justice? You killed."

"How many people have you killed, Esthlos? For what?"

"In your name, for yours"

Athena pursed her lips. As she turned her head, Mr. Berbelek caught her sharp profile, the line of her face highlighted by the evening shadow. Twenty years ago — twenty years ago she was a beautiful woman, naive fools knelt before her form, she blessed young death sufferers with her warm touch. Who could resist the tangible idea of good?

On the waterfront street — that is, on the promenade stretching between the oldest buildings of the Jewish quarter, the walls of First Alexandria and the seashore morphed into a high cliff — several more public auctions were held, but the crowd did not completely disperse. Mr. Berbelek broke up the roaring crowd, opening a free passage for Athena. Thieves and touts avoided them at a distance, and he put out the eye of a pushy street boy with the rykte. From the northwest, from the King of Storms, a strong wind with the smell of sea rot was blowing, the robes of passers-by, curtains and mosquito nets in open windows, canvases of stalls, banners hanging on ancient fortifications fluttered in it. The pre-night wails of gulls and albatrosses echoed across northern Alexandria.

Athena Ratschut stopped in front of the gate of an old building resembling a square tower hidden in the shadow of the walls. The building was actually higher than the walls, the last floor extended above their top — but the top floor was practically invisible from the street level, the tower hung over the edge of the cliff, leaning over the ridges lifted by the Oronei wind. At first glance, the top two floors seemed to have been recently added to the historic structure, and were clearly distinguished by their Nebuchadnezzar architecture.

Athena yanked the bell, again and again. A muscular slave appeared. He greeted Athena. He led them wordlessly through the hall, up the stairs, and down a tight corridor to a windowless vestibule on the third floor. — he disappeared behind a burgundy curtain for a moment, only to return and bow to let Ratschut inside. Mr. Berbelek waited in silence. He pulled down his hood, reached for the amulet hanging on his chest, a shiny tube filled with a white mass, and touched it to his nose for a moment. The doulos stood still, his face like old brass. Mr. Berbelek was straightening the folds of the colorful carpet under his feet with his rykte. The house was very richly decorated, even the pyroki lamps were attached to the walls on silver carvings.

Athena emerged from behind the veil.

"Come in, Esthlos. You have until midnight. You're doing me a favor, don't push me."

Without looking at Hieronim again, she moved quickly towards the stairs.

Mr. Berbelek moved the heavy fabric away like an edict and entered the room. Into a room — to a great hall: the room must have taken up more than half of this floor, and it also opened with a low colonnade onto a terrace overlooking the seaside cliff; this part of the house was probably built in part from oroneiges. The hall was missing not only one wall, but also part of the ceiling, iron steps leading to the top of the tower. Through a wide, rectangular opening, Mr. Berbelek saw a fragment of some wooden and metal structure, the setting sun was shooting with bloody reflections from the polished steel. — that's where two servants were bustling about, cleaning the structure and manipulating its invisible elements. Two other servants, an old Aegyptian and a young Nigerian, were setting out trays, bowls, plates and goblets on a baobab table that partially extended onto the terrace. This turned out to be a complicated task, as this table, otherwise a large and massive piece of furniture, was strewn with incredible amounts of papers, parchments, maps, glass and metal flasks, stills, retorts and

flasks, two urinometers, a simple diopter, several rulers. and zircons;ss various devices whose names Mr. Berbelek did not know and whose purpose he had no idea, yellowed bones, several skulls (non-human), a pot with an exotic plant, a large candlestick, a ruby Pythagorean cube, an oil lamp, a golden statuette of Apis-the Bull of Alexandria , inkpots, coals, pens, chalks, knives, needles, scissors, a broken pipe, an unbroken pipe, a hashish maker, a dirty julbab placed on a stone, a broken globe, a shiny lunarium, several dozen books and scrolls, and in the corner there was a slowly spinning perpetual motion machine.

"Well, please sit down, Esthlos, please, please. I was just getting ready for, um, let's say supper, I'd like to eat in company. Even if you're not hungry... help yourself, please. Athena told me about your son, Esthlos, it's sad, it's sad, of course I offer my humble knowledge if it helps in any way to soothe the pain, although it never will... But sit down, Esthlos, don't stand over me like that!"

Mr. Berbelek sat down in a pulled-up armchair. The servants somehow managed to clear the end of the table, the part that extended onto the terrace, and placed the food dishes here. The tableware quickly appeared in front of Hieronim. He sat with his back to the west, the host — facing the Sun sliding behind the ancient wall. Apparently the light stinging his eyes allowed him to wake up fully. Since Antidektes took up astrology, he completely switched to a nocturnal lifestyle.

Mr. Berbelek put down the rykte, washed his hands in a basin of water, and dried them on a towel. The Nigerian woman was pouring milk and diluted wine into glasses. A censer was lit, and a wave of sour-rose scent poured out onto the terrace.

"You must know, Esthlos"continued Antidektes "that I haven't been following the news from the south very closely over the last year, I've been absorbed by slightly different issues, maybe more distant from... although, who can know, in fact all orders interpenetrate, only chaos is truly detached from reality, and each order must closely cooperate with all other orders, therefore it is also their reflection, and heavenly harmonies, although I am afraid that this is already sounds too Pythagorean, but the celestial harmonies, although now disturbingly out of tune and broken, bring us information about the most current, mundane matters, and I am not talking about any Eastern magic, only classical sophistry, although the superstitious people have never been able to see the difference and every force too he had to explain the great thing to himself in secret words,

holy gibberish is pleasant to the slave's ears, why don't you eat, eat, eat, do you know, for example, where this term comes from?"

Surprised by the interruption in the sophistes's speech, Mr. Berbelek almost choked.

"What?"

"Magic. Mages. Well, as Herodotus writes, in the countries lying west of the lands of the pre-Alexandrian Persians, there lived a tribe of Medes, from which emerged a closed caste of priests who cultivated certain specific rituals, only partly Zoroastrian. They were called "Magoi", probably in old Avestan. Who were the first people recorded in history as magicians: Zoroaster, Astrampsychus, Ostanas, Gobrias, Pazates, just them. Holy men, unconscious teknites or still completely wild kratistos, founders of religions, sages. Aristotle explains very carefully in *Magikos* that no magic exists. Who are these people who today are magoi and appear before the crowds? Cunning demiurgoi, each specialized in one impressive art, for example, demiurgoi pyr breathing fire, demiurgoi of momentum swinging over roofs, oh, great magic, but people want to believe that there are miracles in this world, that not everything can be comprehended by reason, because that's where their hope lives, in that gutter between the known and the unknowable, where —"

"What killed my son then?"

Antidektes blinked, as if the red Sun had blinded him just now, now that it had fully sunk beyond the city walls of Old Alexandria. He put down the meat pie he was cutting. The servants were lighting the pyrokian lamps, and he stared for a moment at their work. The storm king's wind rustled the papers covering the table, shook the lighter dishes, jingled softly, moved the tails of Berbelek's black kirouffa, the sophistes' green julbab. As darkness fell beyond the terrace, in the city and over the roaring sea, Antidektes, illuminated only by the dirty yellow pyrokian light, finally revealed himself to Mr. Berbelek's eyes as exactly the tired, gloomy old man that Mr. Berbelek had imagined from Aneis Panatakis's words. Antidektes had a morph of dry wasting, and if every day he used to eat meals as large as he now eats in Hieronim's presence, it must have been a strong morph. The wrists, protruding from the wide sleeves of the julbab, consisted entirely of brown leather stretched over bird bones. The wrinkled neck seemed to be only slightly thicker than the wrist of Mr. Berbelek's hand. Whatever kept Antidektes alive, Matter certainly played a minor role.

"I was the Hypatia's court sophistes for twenty-seven years, until ninety-one" he resumed, this time speaking slowly and with some melancholy reflection; his gaze hovered somewhere over Mr. Berbelek's left shoulder, occasionally touching the guest's face. "During this time, four expeditions to the Crooked Lands were made on the Hypatia's orders and financed by her. I participated in two of them, the third and the fourth. I presented my conclusions in the treatise *On Curvature*, which was printed by the Academy of the Museum and is available in the Library. Have you read it, Esthlos?"

"I have read everything written about Skoliodoi."

"Of course."

"You described many interesting cacomorphies, drew its boundaries and traced its history, but you did not write why. You didn't explain. You didn't provide a reason."

"Are you sure you're asking the right question, Esthlos? Shouldn't you rather be asking about its Purpose?"

"Isn't it the same?"

Antidektes leaned back in his chair and stretched his hand over the terrace railing, pointing to the starry sky.

"Explain this to me. Give me the reason, Esthlos."

Mr. Berbelek was playing with his empty glass.

"So you say that The Skoliodoi belongs to the world order and does not violate it? So what is the entelechy of the Skew? Where is it going?"

"Don't you ask yourself, Esthlos, where it comes from?" the sophistes smiled slightly. "So ask yourself this riddle: where do we come from? If we exist now in the order in which we exist, and in the future only greater and greater perfection awaits us — what happened before? step back — and beyond — and beyond. What do you see when you get so far away from the Destiny? The Skoliodoi. This is the First Garden from which all living things arose; and in its heart: the place of origin, a ball completely separated from the morph."

"Yes, I know, I know" said Mr. Berbelek, turning the smooth crystal in his

hands. "Everything emerged from chaos and so on, the world and life, the mad zoology of Empedokles.

"There are different cosmogonies. Others say that everything begins with the transformation of Fire into Air, then into Water and Earth. Then the other way around — everything returns to the Fire. The world therefore begins and dies in Fire, a process repeated an infinite number of times.Which diastolic flame are we living in?

"Anyway, a few dozen years ago, nothing distinguished this part of Africa. So what happened there? Has time gone back?"

Antidektes reached for his pipe, realized that it was broken, reached for the other one, and started looking for herb.

A servant appeared.

Mr. Berbelek put down his glass and waited.

"I spoke to Rachel" he said, as the sophistes surrounded himself with a cloud of fragrant smoke. "Why don't you tell me what you told her?"

"You spoke to everyone, right? Anyone who has dealt with the Twist. Several friends have already mentioned it to me... I was actually waiting for you to show up at my place. I don't like it, Esthlos. I understand you as a father, but this is going nowhere. You're acting like you're tracking down a murderer. You have to punish someone for your son's death. True? Because you have such great determination and people bend before you one by one like reeds in the wind... Imagine that Nebuchadnezzar's son dies in a storm in the Mediterranean Sea and the Kratistos decides to take revenge for this death. So he calls all the wise men and asks one by one: what's the cause? where do storms at sea come from? What causes them? Where to strike? The wise must answer, and the Kratistos acts on the basis of the answers he hears. Where would this leave us?"

"Maybe there would be no more deadly storms."

"Ha!"

"Well, I'm not the first. Xerxes ordered the sea to be lashed with iron chains. Olivius razed the mountain that killed his friend. Indeed, history is full of stories

about the madness of rulers."

Antidektes fell silent. He was smoking his pipe with a frown, biting the mouthpiece and mumbling something gratingly under his breath. He looked at Mr. Berbelek through the smoke. Mr. Berbelek waited patiently. After all, they always say, it is stronger than they are, a woman does not hide her charms, and a sophistes boasts of his knowledge, secrecy and silence are against their Form; just wait.

"Jewish alkhemeia!" Antidektes finally growled. "This is what I believe to be the source of the Twist!"

"How?" Mr. Berbelek asked quietly. "Tell me how they did it."

The sophistes cleared his throat, turned in his chair, put down his pipe, and began rummaging under the papers until he found a small, straight black iron knife.

"Purine steel" he says, running the blade across his thumb. They call it purine, but it's not really pure ge; However, higher purification of Earth cannot be achieved. However, it is possible to distill pure hydor, and for centuries there have been rumors that the Lunars extract purinic aer and extract purinic aether. Let's say that we finally achieve success and can freely dispose of all four elements in their pure form; and maybe the fifth one, the stellar pempton stoikheion, uranosis. That everyone will be able to reach into the wardrobe" Antidektes waved his knife at the empty flasks and alkhimeic bottles "Mix freely: Earth, Fire, Water, at will. So I'll pour them into one retort and what will happen? Aristotle replies: what the Form will encompass this Matter. But the Pythagorean alkhemeists, the Jewish numerologists, say: that which the Number corresponds to the proportions of the mixed elements."

Antidektes put down his knife and found a blank piece of paper and a stylus. He motioned for Mr. Berbelek to move closer.

"Leucippus claimed that the smallest particle of matter is an atom. However, we know that there are five types of matter. The smallest things cannot be seen, but can be guessed. Nothing divides forever; where it ends in division, it becomes unity, the basis and the purest principle. So here we have the five archae of which the universe is made: ge, cold and dry Earth; hydor, cold and wet Water; aer, hot and wet Air; pyr, hot and dry Fire; and the pempton

stoikheion, called aether by Aristotle, by Protagoras and Borelius — henosis"

The sophistes drew five signs:

$\gamma\upsilon\alpha\pi V$

"But why is wine different from lemon juice, and lime from sand? Because they differ in the proportions of their ingredients. The number of arches of individual self-elements in each Substance is different. True, Aristotle himself undertook research in this field, which he describes in the fourth book of his *Meteorologii*. According to alkimics, it is the Number that determines the Form. They divided the entire world and everything that exists into numbers. The first alkimic tables were created before the Pitago Uprisings in Paradise; The Jews took over the method and wrote their own Books of Life, based on the numerological codes of their sacred texts.

So these are the books, the cyphers:

$1\gamma1\upsilon$
$1\gamma1\alpha$
$1\gamma1\pi$

"These are the first three cyphers of the Earth into which, according to the Jewish alkimics, hile binds spontaneously. It is a mud of mud, so simple that it is difficult to even talk about its Form. As to the more complex Substances, there is no longer any agreement between the various schools. In Aegypt, the Western Pithraians predominated and they were the ones who went the furthest in their experiments. Here is an example of their sand cypher:

$59\gamma1\upsilon6\alpha14\pi$

—Here is their oil cypher:

$8\gamma 171\upsilon 7\alpha 66\pi$

—Here is their blood cypher:

$11\gamma 449\upsilon 7\alpha 19\pi$

Do you see any similarity between the numbers of these cyphers, Esthlos?"

"You wouldn't ask if there weren't any."

"So look at this cypher"

$10\gamma 20\upsilon 4\alpha 11\pi$

"Now such a Substance, Esthlos, could not exist. If you mixed the elements in the right proportions, the arches would first combine in a different way, namely:

$5\gamma 10\upsilon 2\alpha 11\pi$

The proportions remain the same, but this Form is simpler and always prevails, just as a hundred arche ge are not some complex Substance of the Earth's self-element, but simply a hundred individual arche ge.

This alkimia is much more subtle than the proposals of the ancients, for example Empedocles, according to whom bones were made of the following proportions:

$2\gamma 2\upsilon 4\pi$

However, modern alkimia agrees in the fact that each cyphera must consist of numbers that are indivisible together.

According to Jewish alkimics, the stronger the numbers, the more difficult the numbers are to break down.

The ideal is, of course, when the number of each element is indivisible in itself, that is, when the cyphers consist only of Euclidean numbers, divisible only by one and by themselves:

2 3 5 7 11 13 17 19 23 29

And so on, ad infinitum;

the Pythagoreans continue to seek ever higher, ever stronger Euclideans.

This, as you see, is the cypher of blood: purely Euclidean.

A form with at least one Euclidean number is stronger than non-Euclidean forms.

A form with two Euclidean numbers is stronger than a Form based on one Euclidean.

And so on.

The higher the numbers, the more complex the substance.

I have a book of tables here somewhere...

It was one of the Fathers of the Library, Eratosthenes of Kyrene, who developed the method...

In a minute."

"Never mind. The Skoliodoi."

"Yes. I had it written down somewhere... Patience, Esthlos. These Jews do not hesitate to defile the most sacred things. Oi! Look:

$$4509508057898545445 3\gamma$$
$$7595009151080016652449223792726748985452052945413160073645842090827711\upsilon$$
$$5908726128251795513361021965 93\alpha$$
$$40930828997\pi$$

This is the cypher of a man, ish. Specifically, the human embryo, the Substance of conception. Do you understand what this means, Esthlos? Canto one hundred and thirty-ninth of their holy book describes such a creation, 'a creation in secret, a weaving in the depths of the earth.' This is part of their religion!"

"But they can't do that, they can't create humans or any living being by simply mixing self-elements, right? These are all empty theories, hypotheses."

Antidektes looked at Mr. Berbelek for a long time. Pushing aside the papers, he sank deeper into his chair. His pipe went out; the servant lit it.

The sophistes turned to the dark sea beating against the high cliff and the yellow-pink Moon above it. He stretched out his thin, bare-footed legs.

"The basic question" he said slowly "it comes down to whether the Form is this numerological combination and nothing more, whether the morph equals the Number, and it is enough to combine the appropriate amount and proportion of arches, and the given Form will arise spontaneously, the Matter will organize itself in one necessary way, the pattern will be imprinted on the keros — or is Form something more, additional information and additional force that itself collects and organizes the hile in a determined configuration, "pressing" the appropriate elements into itself, rejecting the rest, like a sculptor extracting a shape from a block of marble: necessary Matter is in the block, but knowledge and will — in a sculptor, and even if we throw stone rubble into a pile a thousand times in the right quantity and proportion, we will not get a statue of Hermes. The dispute has been going on for millennia. For example, Erasistratos conducted such an experiment: he carefully weighed a bird, locked it away and weighed it again after a long time, barely alive, he weighed it with all the droppings and lost feathers. Well, the later weight turned out to be less. This means that there must indeed be an emanation of some invisible factor,

and the difference must come from somewhere — from the weight of life? from the weight of Form? What are the questions?"

"But as long as the alkimics don't have self-elements they could blindly mix..."

"But do they have to have them?"

"You just said it yourself..."

"If Form is only Number and nothing else, there is no need to go back to the individual self-elemental arches, it is enough to perform certain operations on numbers. According to the Pathagoreans, this is what power over the world is based on. Let's say that there was one alkimic who did not strive to purify the hole and build everything from scratch, but found a method of numerological recombination of the whole world. Or at least the recombination of individual Substances. What is the number of possible arche configurations? Infinite. The form does not have to have any purpose here, it is enough that it is numerologically consistent. How many such forms exist? Infinity — when you permute numbers like this, you can always, always, add something, multiply it. What is the name of infinity? Chaos."

"Across the Turtle River..."

"In the middle of nowhere. So that no one would notice."

"But how exactly? What does that mean: 'the recombination of substances'? He went and spoke the Number?"

Antidektes puffed on his pipe and shrugged.

"It's not me who deals with Pythagorean alkimia, I didn't make the discovery, don't ask me, Esthlos. I just gave you an explanation. Tell me honestly, doesn't my description match the nature of the Twist? Isn't that what you saw there?"

"I've heard many such descriptions" said Mr. Berbelek "and the thing is that they all fit equally well, but none of them can be confirmed, no one can be held in the hand of the perpetrator, no one can see the Skoliodoi's method. Now you want me to start looking for someone to blame among the Jews."

“It was you who came to me with a question, Esthlos.”

”Because, as you said, I go to everyone and listen to everyone. Tell me why you didn’t provide this explanation in your work?”

Antidektes laughed hoarsely.

”That’s good! Don’t act naive, Esthlos, do you think they would let anything be printed? They have been ruling every Hypathia’s finances for over a thousand years, see the list of court officials, they hold all the more important positions. Alexandria, Rome, Isaion, Byzantion, Toloza, Corduba, Chrem, have influence in all major cities. After all, they caused both Pythagorean Uprisings — and will you find anything on this topic in the works of historians? Not a word. Why do you think Hypathia suddenly stopped financing expeditions to the Crooked Lands? Read *The Wars of Jerusalem* by Ben Shilah, Esthlos. It was not without reason that Ben Shilah was expelled from the academy. Why did I lose my position at court? This whole embezzlement scandal is a cover-up. I offended them and now...”

Driving to the Parseids, to Lotte’s palace through night Alexandria in the creaking and crackling wiktyka, Mr. Berbelek pondered over the riddle of jew-phobia. Indeed, the Jews consider themselves a chosen people and are the only ones who retain their national Form, even when they live for generations under the strong anthoses of non-Jewish kratistoi. Besides, history has not yet seen any Jewish kratistos, unless we count the unfortunate cruxifiction of that religious madman; but extremely few slaves are born among the Jews. However, there are many Jewish demiurgoi and teknitoi, especially teknitoi soma and psyche. Jews constitute the core of the government bureaucracy in all post-Alexandrian states, and they are most often found in banks and trading companies. wThe number is strong in the Jewish Form. However, there are no advantages that make them superior to other nations. If this is where hatred comes from, the Greeks, Macedonians, Romans, Persians and even the Herdonians should be much more hated. They are not. The reason must therefore be different.

In truth, there was only one group with a similar dislike, both universal and irrational: the Pythagoreans. For over two thousand years, even during Pythagoras’s lifetime, this sect has aroused fear, hatred, contempt, jealousy and something like the pious reverence that man subconsciously has for the Hidden. At first, they still operated as an open political party, but Pythagoras himself provoked these reactions by introducing a complex system of initiations,

teaching from behind a veil and in a mask, ordering adepts to remain silent for many years, and imposing the rigor of various religious prohibitions and customs, about which Aristotle writes extensively in his treatise *On the Pythagoreans*. Already ancient, when they wanted to slander someone. They wrote: *He is suspected of belonging to the Pythagoreans*. While Jews can be identified by face and name, Pythagoreans exist only in suspicion. Someone will make a career too fast, will fall into the ruler's favor too easily, will have success in business that is disproportionate to the strength of his morph — know the hand of the Pythagoreans in this. Just ten years ago, great riots broke out in Sicily when the news spread among the people that Pythagoras himself had appeared in one of the local fishing villages, once again reborn from the staff of Hermes. It is impossible to say whether this sect still really exists and functions. Even those who openly admit to being members of it probably do so out of a desire to participate in the legend, to take on someone else's form.

Perhaps these are simply two names for feelings as universal and deeply rooted in man as anger, joy, love, greed, and admiration. Naive are those who believes in morph reversal. Likewise, in every large group of children there must be one who is pushed around by all the others; and in every large group of men there must be one whom all the others will fear.

In Esthle Lotte's palace, the third supper had long since been called, the household and guests had gone to bed, only every fourth lamp was burning, the corridors were silent and dim, Mr. Berbelek met only one doulos, hurrying somewhere with an armful of sheets, bare feet were silently treading on the floor. The slippery floor. The corridor in the north wing twisted into a spiral; As Hieronim passed Alithea's closed bedroom door, he heard muffled laughter from behind it. It's been almost two months since Abel died — but it was actually only when David Monshebe returned from Upper Aegypt that Alithea emerged from the depressive cycle of mood swings she had fallen into during the return journey.

After dismissing Porte, taking off his jugras and throwing off his kirouffa and shalwar, Mr. Berbelek turned into the bathroom. Shulima was lying on the bed, stretched out on her stomach, reading a calligraphy scroll by the light of an oil lamp, she didn't even raise her head when he passed by.

"He's actually a good influence on her." said Mr. Berbelek during the ablution. "This morning I met him in the courtyard"

"Who?" Shulima exclaimed.

"Your Monshebe!" Hieronim raised his voice. "You can congratulate yourself, whatever your goal in this intrigue. He asked for her hand..."

The meeting seemed to be a coincidence, but one of those that could be planned: Mr. Berbelek was going to a wiktyka already waiting in the front driveway of the palace, he had an appointment with Aneis Panatakis in Canopis, where they were to visit the Kristian hospital for parasites; but he barely made it to the stairs — David Monshebe emerged from the shadow, around the corner. Polite greetings, exchange of platitudes; Mr. Berbelek was in a hurry, but the ares consistently imposed the form of a lazy conversation, from sentence to sentence, from memory to memory — David smoking, Hieronim tapping his rykte on the edges of the stone steps — they reached non-trivial topics and the conversations were as serious as could be. "From the first moment I saw your daughter, Esthlos, that evening at Esthle Lotte's party, when I kissed Alithea's hand..." "Are you trying to tell me you're in love?" Mr. Berbelek was very careful not to laugh. The ares narrowed his eyes and turned his back to the Sun. "Yes I think so." "You're telling me this because...?" "She has great respect for you, Esthlos." "Really?" "Me too. I wouldn't want to... With all due respect, Esthlos." Mr. Berbelek shook the offered hand tightly, leaning over young Monshebe from under his black hood (strange: he remembered him from Laetitia's party). David smiled uncertainly. It was in this Form that they parted — the uncertainty, the shyness of that Aegyptian aristocrat's smile, that twitch of his lips when he looked up at Mr. Berbelek, that was the seal of his homage, a sign of humility. He had not yet uttered the words used; but he was already asking.

"Why do you always suspect me of some intrigue? It's even against you. As if I wanted to harm Alithea! David is one of the most eligible bachelors in Aegypt. Even if he did marry one of the Hypatia's daughters, Alithea would remain First Wife."

Mr. Berbelek entered the bedroom, clapping his wet feet against the smooth surface of the mosaic. The night wind moved the white curtains in the Chameroy windows, the moonlight penetrated the thin fabric in scattered beams; otherwise, all the light in the great room came from the lamp at the head of the bed. Shulima was lying on rolled silks, the moon's shadow was spread on her buttocks and along her back, the lightest silk. Antique incense burners placed

in the corners of the bedroom filled the air with the heavy, fatty smell of burning hyex bark, invisible smoke drifted up through the nose into the brain — everything seemed softer, more slow, more touchable, even the moonbeams, a shiver ran through them as they fell on bare skin.

Mr. Berbelek walked along the windows, pushing aside the curtains and pulling the feidical nets to the floor; there were already a dozen moths and nameless night worms crowding around the lamp. Behind the windows there was a narrow balcony, from which one could go down to the palace gardens. Windows look like doors, no shutters or glass, open stairs outside — all of Mr. Berbelek's instincts screamed against such architecture, especially after the years he spent in Vodenburg. However, such was Nebuchadnezzar's anthos, such customs and aesthetics he attracted, and only those who stubbornly did not submit to him considered them unnatural.

"What is this? Some ancient peace treaties again? Why are you reading this stuff?"

"No, no, it's a copy of the report of the legion commander who got lost during Upazuiosa's southern offensive. The five hundred and ninety-eighth year since the accession of Nebunasira, king of Babylon — it's already the Alexandrian Era, right?"

"Yes I think so."

"The library says it's authentic. It turns out that they were then walking through the lands of Marabratta, look here, for example"

Mr. Berbelek stretched out on the bed with a heavy sigh.

"Forgive me today, I've had enough."

She looked at him over the scroll.

"What, have you been to this Antidektes?"

"He tried to set me on his enemies. Besides, if he was right in his theories, this experimental steelworks, into which I invested several thousand, would have turned out to be a complete failure. Maybe it will turn out to be... Tomorrow the Director of the Library will receive me; the day after tomorrow I'm going to Pachoras, there are still people living there who used to lead merchant caravans

along the routes beyond the Turtle. True, when I think again about those stinking fellach mud huts, made of Nile brick and reeds..."

"You should finally give it a rest. Sophistae have been racking their brains over this for years. What do you want to do, blackmail them into something they don't know themselves?"

Mr. Berbelek put his hand into her hair and straightened her blond curls between his fingers.

"My son is dead, and I have — What? Back to doing business? For parties and orgies in sunny Alexandria? To forget?"

She huffed in annoyance.

"Your mourning rituals are peculiar. I can tell you some much better ways to get even with your conscience. For example, dedicate this time to Alithea. Or me. Or even just money: If this is your fight, this is where you will rebuild your strength. As a last resort, I can give you a good whipping, maybe you'll find some relief in that. You know you moan in your sleep?"

"I do what?"

"You moan, you mutter, you whine through clenched teeth. I have to wake you up so I can fall asleep myself. If you would finally give up, the longer you dig into this wound, the more it will get messed up."

"I thought you would support me. Alone — how many years did you devote to researching the mystery of the Skoliodoi? Twelve? Don't be jealous of other people's obsessions. Besides, I won't believe you're not interested anymore. Why are you reading this old stuff, hmmm?"

Shulima put the scroll aside. Throwing the pillow to the other side of the bed, she slid onto the supine Berbelek, stretched her legs along his legs, rested her forearms on his chest, her hot body on top of his cool and damp body. He brushed her hair away with his hand to keep it from falling on his face.

She was looking solemn, only three or two breaths away, he knew that seriousness.

"So you won't give up?" she asked.

"No" he replied, adapting to her tone. He looked for any signs in her face revealing feelings, thoughts, mood, but — as usual, as she put on Esthle Amitace's alabaster mask — he couldn't read anything.

"You really want to know." She bit her lower lip. Only then did he understand.

"You knew" he whispered.

"I knew."

"You knew, you knew."

"I knew."

"You took me there — For what?

"Slow down a bit. Firstly — ouch, that hurts, let go! — first my word: I didn't want any harm to you, Abel might as well not have gone at all, I only wanted you to cross the Turtle, I wanted to see you in the Twist. Do you believe me, Hieronim?"

"You know I always believe you. He took her head in both hands, brought it to his, half, a quarter of a breath, the anthosi merged into one, soon even their hearts will beat in the same rhythm. — On the lake on the night of Isis. What did you tell me? You're not a messenger for kratistoi at all. Why, he would never be able to lie."

"I didn't say I was. Remind yourself. I didn't say."

"Why are you denying it? If you're not, lie as much as you want."

She laughed hoarsely. Placing a hot hand on Hieronim's cheek, she ran her fingernail along the bridge of his nose, above his mouth, around his eye. She was slipping out of his Form, there was nothing he could do about it, she would soon make him laugh too.

"What if I say I'm lying? Is it true or a lie?"

"It's true that you say you're lying."

"No kidding! Hieronim."

"When you start saying it, it's still true; when you finish —it's already a lie.

"What if you received a letter like this: *Everything written here is a lie.*"

"It doesn't matter what it says. Let's say I hold an egg in my hand and a chick hatches out of it. Will it turn out to be a rooster or a hen? It's impossible to say yet. But I say it firmly: 'It's a rooster'. Let it actually be a rooster. However — I lied."

"So it's the intention that decides."

"Always. What is a lie without a liar? A verbal accident."

"Is that true?"

"Either."

"So even if you later find out that the words are true..."

"If it was said with the intention of lying..."

"What about a lie said with full conviction?"

"How do you know it's false if you think it's true?"

"I'll find out later."

"But then you no longer claim it to be true."

"So how? Is the same statement sometimes true and sometimes false?"

"I know, I know, the Aristotelians would stone me. I'm no sophistes. However, lies and truth always depend on who is speaking and who is listening. You for example. Who are you really? Whatever you tell me now — I know I will believe you, and it will be true."

She jerked her head and escaped from his embrace. Pulling her legs up vigorously, she sat on Hieronim's chest, spreading his arms apart with her knees. She sat upright, with her hands placed symmetrically on her thighs, with her hair thrown back, her head raised, looking down, without smiling, the right profile illuminated, the left in shadow, the right bracelet shining, the left snake in the shadow, unmoved by the pose of the king, the priest, even her chest barely rises with her calm breathing, why is she so calm as she looks down at

him, like a reptile she just stepped on, what crawls in the dust is not worth any feeling, not even contempt or disgust — Mr. Berbelek understood at that moment exactly why the gampanthrope had, without hesitation, gone under Esthle Amitace's knife on the night of Laetitia's after-party in May, why he had laid down submissively at the feet of Shulima, the beautiful one, the most beautiful one, and waited for death.

"I was born in the seven hundred and thirteenth year after the Fall of Rome" she began in classical Attic Greek, half whispered, half chanted. "In the land of dust and harmony. For the first two hundred years I never set foot on the surface of the Earth. I was living on fire; I lived under the Earth's green eye, under its black blind, half a month's day, half a month's night, everything was bigger, truly infinite — time, world, happiness, youth, mother. Four centuries in my mother's crown, at her side, yes, my dear, you also see the eidolos of the goddess, wherever I go, no matter how many years pass, her morph will remain in me, she will remain me. Leese saw this and knew. She came to pay her respects — but her tribute was this: eternal silence; she had to die. They would still punish me with death. I imposed a different appearance on myself, although I know that the physical appearance is the least important; If I could, I would disguise myself better. But I can't, mother is too strong. She is the strongest human ever born. Before they united against her and drove her out, she spread her order over most of Europe, half of Africa, and part of Asia. Yes, it would encompass the entire Earth; and that would be good, you would bless her. You're right, I can't say otherwise, I can't think otherwise, but — do you believe me, Hieronim?"

He took her hand, brought her wrist to his lips.

"I can't think otherwise."

She pulled her hand away.

"Look me in the eye. I am the daughter of the Kratista Illeia Kollotropia, Illeia Potnia, Illeia the Cruel, the Witch of the Moon. My name is Shulima Amitace after my father, Esthlos Adam Amitace, a teknites psyche. I descended to Earth to put an end to the Crookedness of the world."

Seven, eight, nine, he counted the beats of his heart; it wasn't good.

"How can I pay tribute to you and survive?"

"I don't want you to pay tribute to me!"

She jumped up with as sudden a burst of energy as before, jumping off the bed and running to the nearest window; If it weren't for the feidic net, she would probably have fallen onto the balcony, maybe into the garden. A large insect of the night fluttered behind the net — she hit it with the back of her hand and it fell.

It took her a while to calm her breathing and voice.

"I promised you the greatest battle of all time. You can't run away from her anymore, you're already waiting for her. We have two plans for you in it. Whichever one comes true, we won't need a Hieronim Berbelek kneeling, but a Hieronim Berbelek spitting in the face of a Kratistos. I want a Hieronim Berbelek like that."

She didn't look at him, her back turned as she spoke, staring out into the Alexandrian night. Mr. Berbelek sat down and touched his feet to the cold floor. The scent of hyex incense slowed his movements and thoughts. A slender silhouette of a woman in the tall rectangle of a window — this one image was clearly visible in his pupils. He remembered the cotoneaster dagger left under the kirouffa. Too late, too late, too late for everything, the morph of young love gripped his heart. Abel, Alithea — I was born of you. Abel, Abel, Abel.

Mr. Berbelek shook his head, resigned.

"So what is, why is, who is Crooked Africa?"

The yellow moonlight gave the dark skin of Shulima Amitace the smoothness and color of a thousand-year-old bronze statue.

"It's time for you to meet my mother."

M.
Exaltation

THE light of Knossos, the roar of the sea breaking against the breakwaters, the cries of birds, the stench of the great city, the fires of the Labyrinth — they left it all behind. The black-haired shepherdess led Mr. Berbelek away — through olive and fig groves, through vineyards, along field paths and between fields of neomorph cereals — to the green meadows stretching on the slopes of the southern hills. All of Kaftor is rocky mountains and green mountains, the gods have plowed it far and wide many times, countless earthquakes, volcanic explosions, it was a land of great disorder and exhaustion of nature until Lady llleia took it under her wing. Is this where her anthos began to grow, or is this where she emerged into the world? There is no agreement between the cults and the historians. This island, however, was one of the first to feed on her breast, even before the Kratista moved north, east, south, smoothing and ordering the keros wherever she trod. Currently, Kaftor is balancing on the border of three crowns: The Warlock from the northeast, the Seven-Fingers from the east, and Nebuchadnezzar from the south. By no means has the entire Witch Moon morph been wiped out from here; Was it not thanks to her that now, in the middle of winter, in the damp predawn of a short day, they could wander through snowless meadows, wearing only light coats, with lush grass under their feet?

As soon as they turned left and east, a jagged line of dawn appeared over the mountain ridge. The shepherdess pointed with her stick ahead, at the hills above Amnisos and the harbor itself below, to the north. He didn't know her

name, she didn't introduce herself to him; After hiding the coin, she just smiled and remained silent. They hadn't exchanged a word since leaving Knossos. She walked slowly, for which he was grateful: Despite the flat Oroneiges stone sewn into the bottom of his backpack, the weight of the luggage made Mr. Berbelek sweat and shorten his breathing. Only as much as he can carry, Shulima told him. Be ready not for weeks, but for months; which is not a trip to an aristocratic country estate or even a jurja. You will leave the earthly sphere, the world of the four elements and human laws.

When they stood on the terrace of the hill above Amnisos, the sun was already hanging above the horizon in the sky. The earth was slowly warming, and white mist was rising from the lower meadows, dispersed by the morning wind.

"Altar Square" said the guide, making a circle in the air with her stick. She turned toward a shallow ravine and pointed to a group of ancient fig trees. "Eileithyia. — And to the north. — Amnisos, Dia."

Mr. Berbelek nodded at her. With a sigh of relief, he shrugged off his backpack.

After bowing politely, the little shepherdess walked quickly, half running, down and towards the coast. She disappeared from Hieronim's sight behind one of the hills.

According to Shulima, the moon smuggler should have arrived at dawn. He was probably watching the meadow from hiding, waiting for Mr. Berbelek to be left alone. Hieronim walked slowly along the slope and gorge. There were maybe a dozen large cuboid boulders left here — these were the ancient altars. After Illeia's Exile, all cults related to her morph were banned, especially in the lands of her Anthos, but in the case of religions, such prohibitions are often counterproductive. The boulders were not overgrown with weeds or covered with moss; on the surface of some of them, Mr. Berbelek saw traces of wax, burns, dark spots (dried blood?), scratched drawings. Bull horns could be seen from a distance. After so many centuries, prohibitions were not enforced very rigorously. For example, no one in the city was surprised when a foreigner asked loudly for a guide to the Grotto.

From the Square of the Altars and in front of the gorge there was an unobstructed panorama of Amnisos and the dark, stormy sea to the northern horizon;

a caravan fishing boat was passing the rocky islet of Dia. Mr. Berbelek turned his back to the sea and went down into the thicket of fig trees. The entrance to the Eileithyte Grotto was hidden behind the oldest trees. It's hard to talk about a well-trodden path — but it wasn't overgrown. He leaned into the cave to see if he could see any light or if something would flash in the darkness. The ground sloped down here not very steeply, and the vault, although not high, allowed one to straighten up freely. After narrowing the vestibule, the cave opened into a long chamber, more than twenty pous wide, which Mr. Berbelek saw as soon as he passed the narrowing, leaving behind him the glow of the winter day. — because Eileithyia was actually pulsating with a soft, red light, visible from the entrance. Someone lit a fire deep inside the cave.

Stumbling over unevenness flooded with oily shadows, over gravel and rock fragments, Mr. Berbelek walked towards the light, passing stalagmites, stalactites and huge, wide stalagnates, carved or naturally formed into fantastic shapes, stone dreams about people, animals, daimons. Even in the dim, flickering light, he could see the countless paintings and carvings that covered the surfaces of the sooty walls. There were rags, rotten wood, candle stubs, probably even bones strewn about there, and he tripped on them too.

The old man was kneeling by a small fire, with his side to the entrance. He must have heard Mr. Berbelek approaching, but he didn't look at him. He wore a thick coat made of raw bearskin over his broad shoulders. He slowly turned a clay cup in his left hand. There was a jute bag lying next to it.

Mr. Berbelek crouched behind the fire. White, bushy eyebrows, thick features, pale skin — the old man was not from these parts, rather from the north of Europe, from Thor's aura. His neck and chin were covered with a complex morphunk, steel and animal bones flashing through the wrinkled skin.

"Blessings from the Lady of the Beatitudes, Potnia Atana, meter of a hundred names" said Mr. Berbelek in the koine dialektos.

The old man raised his cup.

"Underground you speak to Eleuthia" he replied hoarsely.

"I'm talking to you, Epistates."

"Underground, Eleuthia listens."

Mr. Berbelek realized that the old man was intoxicated by hashish smoke or some narcotic drink; he wasn't drunk. Hieronim tried to look into his eyes, but the other stared into the cup, his heavy eyelids covering his blue pupils.

Mr. Berbelek grabbed his arm and pulled him.

"Come, come, it's already day, time is running out, we had an appointment, didn't you promise her, come out for some fresh air, well, we have to go."

"Yes, the end of the night, as I swore. Drink." He pressed a cup into Mr. Berbelek's hand with the remains of a dark liquid at the bottom. "How else will you meet them? The same today as five or ten thousand years ago. He was shitting here, in this exact place, a small maze, a straight wall wrapped five times. No trace. How many are buried here under her name, there is no trace. But look at the rocks. Can you see them? They come out at night when you light a good fire, not too small, not too big, and drink the milk of the Poppy Goddess. Their pre-human morph: heads of animals on the torsos of men and women, heads of men on the bodies of beasts — daimons from before the beginning of the world. Won't you say hello? Bow to them. You have. Drink. You see?"

The flickering light of the fire jumped along the walls, stalactites, stalagmites, stalagnates, gravel scree, one configuration of shadows almost already signifying something, the other — a long-winded gibberish of darkness.

Mr. Berbelek growled a curse and threw the cup deep into the cave.

"Get up!"

The old man looked up; straightening his shoulders, he looked at Mr. Berbelek leaning over the fire and blinked. Shadows also jumped over Hieronim's face and figure.

"Yes, Esthlos."

They went out to the Altar Square.

"Where to now?"

"This way, Esthlos."

"Is your head all right now?"

"Yes. Sorry. I'm an old man."

"Wait, I have to take my backpack."

Up the slope to the northeast, and then up again along the palm-covered slope of the remorphed mountain (it was too regular in shape), and to the source of the cold stream, and between the ruins of the seaside observation tower, and down again, and over the hills along the coast — this was how Mr. Berbelek was led by the moon smuggler, old Nanu Agilatyla, who, as he claimed, remembered the times of King Atapos the Fourteenth, the last of the Eeveric Kaftorski dynasty. As if he was ashamed of his behavior in Eileithyi, just in case, he did not allow Mr. Berbelek to say a word, continuing a loud chatter about the times that had passed.

"Her temples, her labyrinths, Knossos, Faiscos, Zakro, Mallia, Kydonia, Rethymnon, Gournia, Monastiraki, here she was born, here she emerged into the world from the shadow, from under the earth, here she heard her first names. What the East gave her, what Aegypt gave her — pleć, a place between heaven and earth; because she was born here. If you are allowed to see her, Esthlos, even from a distance... Oh, there are still people who are waiting for her return, although of course they will not say it out loud to a stranger, the Warlock impales, Seven-Fingers burns, K'Azura beheads, Nebuchadnezzar beheads, how they fear her. There are still people — and all they know about her are legends about legends. In silence. Have you noticed, Esthlos, how unanimously they are silent about her here? I visit Kaftor once or twice a year. This silence, this deaf longing sinks deeper and deeper within them. After all, in the first centuries after the Fall of Rome, Kaftor in its aura once again became the greatest power in the Mediterranean, as it had been four or five thousand years earlier, it again ruled the entire maritime trade, spread its colonies to the coasts of Europe and Africa, that's where you see these ruins, Esthlos, hundreds of ships sailed from here every day, the greatest riches in the world were brought here, to her temples, to her labyrinths, all their secrets have not been discovered yet, do not believe in the official versions, she brought teknites ge from the most distant lands, for centuries they worked underground, in caves undersea, there are said to be secret entrances from mountain sanctuaries; and there lies the greatest labyrinth, the everlasting Earth Form, resistant to all cataclysms, as long and wide as Kaftor, and even further, under the seabed: corridors for hundreds of stadia, chambers of dust, treasuries, black palaces, the oldest altars, cities in the rock. She will come back someday."

At noon they stopped at the top of the seaside cliff, a hundred pous above the waves crashing in thunder against the rocky bay. — no ship would enter here, no one would descend the vertical wall — and Agilatyla fell silent for the first time as they ate their cold meal: cheese and crackers washed down with bitter agritta. The sky was gray, the clouds were low, swollen with the bad ferments of aeru and pyr, a strong western wind chased them over the island, crowding them into massive fronts, and thanks to this, the dirty skies appeared for a short while.

Burping, the old smuggler stretched out on his back, placing his hands behind his head. Mr. Berbelek realized that this was not a halfway stop, that they had arrived at their destination. He sat nearby on his cloak, chewing on a blade of winter grass. Two fishing boats tacked boldly against the rough waves and gusty wind, their low sails appearing and disappearing against the dark green surf.

"I've been serving her for fifty years" Nanu muttered. "I managed to visit her kingdom once. I'm not stupid, I know she hasn't even heard of me. How many people like me, who are content with silent hope, often paying with their lives. We are passing away; you remain. What do you really think about us?"

Mr. Berbelek was chewing a straw. However, the "you" from Agilatyla's mouth made an impression on him, although he tried to hide it.

"You don't want honesty" he muttered.

The old man sat down and looked at Mr. Berbelek.

"I want it."

Mr. Berbelek spat out the straw.

"You are not human. You have no will of your own. You are ruled by another Form. Fifty years and what's in it for you? You haven't even seen her. You will die, you will be forgotten, nothing will survive. Unconditional faithfulness befits a doulos."

"Look, Esthlos, they're here."

Agilatyla stood up and started waving his arms.

A stone tower broke through the storm clouds to the north, falling in an arc over the sea towards the cliff. Mr. Berbelek also stood up and stared at the phenomenon. The minaret soared in the air, lying on its side, with its slender dome facing forward; long banners hung from the windows and cloisters, shooting in the wind like rukats. Attached along the upper side of the turret was a narrow aerostat spindle, ten times narrower than the skinniest air pig. The spindle was black and the stones of the tower were dark red, fiery marble — now Mr. Berbelek guessed that it was built entirely of oroneiges. Its architect liked the shapes of shells, spirals, open circles and asymmetrical arches — this is how the horizontal and vertical floors were arranged in it, the floors wrapped in colonnades that looked out into the air, serpentine terraces surrounded by sculptures of gods, people, animals and daimons. A stone angel stood on the bow dome and showed the direction of flight with a crystal scythe, white ribbons several dozen pous long stretched from his wings, and torn bandages torn from the recovered man by the wind; the angel was missing his left forearm, it had been knocked off by some overhead obstacle.

The tower descended more and more slowly, finally reaching the level of the cliff and turning sideways towards it. The people gathered on its main terrace (Agilatyla shouted and exchanged jokes and curses with them) threw a dozen or so ropes with hooks to the top of the cliff.

Mr. Berbelek pointed to the black sides of the aerostat and the silver pattern running along them: tangled thorns, like a chain of steel lightning.

"I don't know this emblem."

"You didn't think, Esthlos, that I would take you straight to the Moon, did you?" the old man laughed.

"Whose aerostat is this?"

"The exiles stick together. The Storm King remains loyal to Lady Illeia. Even though it doesn't befit him. Will you jump over, Esthlos, or should I tie you up?"

Life in Oronea was essentially no different from life on the surface of the Earth. Within a week, Mr. Berbelek had gained one enemy, one ally and

several subjects there; an angel also fell in love with him.

The angels passed the Moon Court on the edge of Oronea every day at dawn and dusk, on their way to and from the wheat harvest. While waiting for the arrival of the moonboat, travelers came out to the meadow in front of the Manor, watching the irregular procession. The angels were people of the aerial morph, descendants of the oldest families of Oronea, completely devoured by the anthos of the Storm King. They wore ornate armor of bronze and iron, and chains of heavy jewelry ran around their legs and arms. Without them they would be too light, the natural resting place of angels was somewhere between heaven and earth. It was they who descended down the weeds (stadia and stadia under the plateau), tending them and cutting them down during the harvest season. Angels, even if they fall, will not fall. Even when they walked mixed with crowds of other farm workers, they could be easily recognized: their hair, if not wrapped around the neck or cut short, rose behind them in a horizontal wave, breaking into a jagged halo as the angels turned their heads or took a step back — as if the air around them had the density of water.

The fields and roads of Oronea were covered with a thick layer of blindingly white snow. Every day, usually before dawn, the Kratistos brought heavy rainfall. The Moon Court, like all the other houses (Mr. Berbelek was not in the city, but this is what the Oroneans told him), had large tanks on the roof and in the back, from which rain or snow hydor was collected. After Mr. Berbelek's arrival, the Manor hosted a total of twenty-five travelers waiting for a boat to the Moon; after adding the servants and permanent residents of the Manor, as well as seasonal residents such as Agilatyla, it turned out that there could not be enough water for everyone in the quantity they would like, and water rationing was introduced. The size of these rations, of course, corresponded to the position that each traveler managed to achieve — this is how a hierarchy was established (because some is always established) and this was the reason for the first clashes of wills.

How does a born doulos reason? "It's stupid, I won't fight over a few more cups of water, let these idiots eat each other." So he resigns and everyone now knows his place — this is how Form is born. How does an aristocrat reason? "No foreigner will limits my actions. Whose tribute did I pay him to now fulfill his wishes?" Submission is not in his nature. Mr. Berbelek demanded unlimited access to the water, and when one of the Heltic priestesses, Arianna, objected, he forced her to kiss his feet. This is how he gained a faithful ally. The priestess's

teenage daughter, Marianna, swore eternal hostility to him. Most of the other travelers bowed their heads in silence.

In addition to the five priestesses from Heltia, a large group of Gypsies were also waiting for the boat. Who actually participated in these secret pilgrimages to the Lady of the Moon? Her followers, her agents, members of her cults and cults symmetrical to her morph, as well as outlaws of various origins, escapees from the anthos of her hostile kratistoi, seeking asylum outside the earthly sphere, and finally sophistae who somehow managed to gain the trust of guides and buy their way to the moon — knowing full well that they would likely never be allowed to leave again, not after what Elking had done. After all, the Lady fed on secrets, the Lady was most powerful in the indescribable.

Mr. Berbelek built the stories of individual travelers from interrupted conversations during meals, from the whispers of servants, and from gossip overheard while walking through the snow. For example, two youths with the Anaxegiros morph turned out to be professional deicides wanted by all Herdon militias, Jan and Han Zarzog. The Herdon companies hired them to murder native cults. The brothers would go into the wilderness, find priests, holy places and miraculous personifications, and then enforce a ritual of humiliation, paying homage to Anaxegiros or the king. The trick was to choose such a Form for this ritual that no savage would be left with the slightest doubt as to the power of the individual deities. The Zarzogs slew gods along the eastern and southern coasts of Herdon, leaving behind them the ruins of dreams, the ashes of dreams, and the corpses of immortals. Unfortunately, they had a sense of humor. When it turned out that they also used to receive tributes on behalf of non-existent rulers, creating crazy religions and iconoclastic mythologies on the spot for the half-animal autochthons, the verdict was quickly passed. Godbearing is a much dirtier and more dangerous business than deicide.

Mr. Berbelek exchanged casual pleasantries and cautious jokes with his fellow travelers. Several times he went for walks in the company of an old Frankish sophistes, the self-proclaimed biographer of the Illeia Kollotropia, Sharl Donta. Katrina, a cheerful British aristocrat, also spent several mornings with Hieronim; Hieronim suspected that she performed a similar function as Zueia (as Illeia's spy and agent). They climbed together to the top of the embankment, looked into the abyss, Katrina laughed, throwing pebbles and snowballs into the cloudy abyss.

The Moon Court was only a stadium away from the rampart that ran along the edge of the sky plateau. This earthen dam was almost a hundred pous high; at dusk and dawn, her shadow spread across the snow to the doorstep of the Manor. In places, the embankment turned into a regular wall, with wickets, gates and hanging platforms from which — on complex systems of girders and tackles — angels descended into the thickets of hanging gardens and vineyards. The high ramps and spirals of the Heavenly Stairway were also based on the embankment. This was where the air pigs arriving in Oronea moored, for the King of Storms had banned the approach of aerostats to the city itself, in the heart of Kratistos's Anthos strange things could happen to the air compressed in the pig's belly, even in the case of such small amounts of air that were used for steering the flight to the height of the Oroneiges towers.

The manor stood on the road leading from the city to one of the main gates in the rampart; right next to it, the Arabic architecture of the Heavenly Stairway, intended for lunar boats, rose upwards. Mr. Berbelek inquired as to what the role of the gate was for the city, which is accessible only by air. Anyway, the city — visible from the Court as a mass of blinding white, sometimes as jagged shadow, in a cloud of a thousand fluttering banners — had its own wall and a gate in that wall. On the other hand, however (and Mr. Berbelek understood this perfectly), the form of a city without walls and gates would always be defective, incomplete and weaker in some way.

Mr. Berbelek now had a lot of free time and practically nothing to do. In the Court's library he found several different editions and translations of *My Trip to the Moon and What I Saw* by Ferdinand Elking; he had read it as a child, now he remembered it. Also *Gaudat's Travels* by Jan Gaudat, *The Dream of Scipio Cicero*, *Pharsis* by Ibrahim ibn Gassan. The impression of unreality and fairy-tale nature of this entire expedition returned.

Maybe he never really left Vodenburg, maybe he fell asleep there in a warm bath, in the darkness of a cramped bathroom, having finally slit his wrists, and what if all — is this one long death dream...? Or posthumous sleep. Philosophers write that such assumptions cannot be verified, but Mr. Berbelek saw clearly that they cannot be true: that Hieronim Berbelek, whose Form included suicide, would not have dreamed of such a Hieronim Berbelek who leads the jurja into the wild cacomorphs of Africa, bends the necks of women and men and who rules over the pleasure of the daughter of the Moon Witch.

He considered writing a letter to Alithea. Air pigs flew from Oronea to Alexandria every two or three weeks. In a letter he could write what he could not say — the form of the letter is different, it allows for a certain impersonal honesty, which is too embarrassing when you are face to face with someone close, your daughter, especially your daughter. We can only be completely uninhibited in the presence of complete strangers, whose thoughts and feelings mean nothing to us. Every love is a kind of tribute to someone else's Form — mother, father, lover, child.

He couldn't enclose his heart in any number then, his farewell to Alithea was short, dry and dispassionate. — I should be able to make it before summer. You said you didn't want to go back north to Neurgia. You can stay with Esthle Lotte as long as you want; Besides, you know that Laetitia likes you very much. We'll talk about David when I get back. I hired tutors for you. You can always turn to Aneis Panatakis for money; and don't let him tell you that the customs officers just cleaned out his treasury. Shulima will stay. Listen to her. You'll listen to her anyway. — He didn't have to order it. Shulima will take care of everything. She, a reflection of Illeia's form, and Alithea, who in turn reflected Amitace's form... Ultimately, the goddess sees herself in the morph of every woman.

Now, in a letter, he will write to her exactly this: what pride she finds in herself, seeing in Alithea subsequent signs of Aristotle's entelechy, sensing its supreme shape, all the beauty and power that she herself does not sense.

Of course, he never sent this letter.

The waiting seemed to drag on forever; it was the only activity they could devote themselves to with full commitment: wait. Some divined by the clouds and stars, by the flight of birds and pigs of the air; others got drunk. The gypsies played their own games, completely incomprehensible to strangers. Herdon's deicides baked large quantities of disgustingly sweet cakes. Mr. Berbelek walked all the way, climbed to the top of the gate and from there he looked out for the boat, watching the work of the angels and the slow wave of the giant windweeds.

This is how the young angel found him. Wrapped in white fur from some Oronean animal — maybe a bird, because it looked like it was made of a million pigeon feathers — she sat down next to him (with every movement her invisible armor creaked) and offered Mr. Berbelek some tobacco. Tobacco was very expensive in Oronea, it did not want to grow in the Storm King's crown, and

pigs from Herdon did not come often.

Mr. Berbelek thanked him. She knew Greek. They lit.

The angel waved her legs in heavy boots, hanging over the snow-covered battlements. Hieronim remembered Alithea and Claudia Veroniusz on board the *Rising*.

“I have a daughter your age.”

The angel tilted her head, her fair hair swirling around her in a curved spiral.

“Why are you going there? You don’t have to, you are stronger than them. Was it really mostly broken people, with a shattered Form, who went to the Moon?“

”I’m supposed to lead an army for her.”

The angel raised her eyebrows.

“Do you want to go back?”

Mr. Berbelek shrugged.

“What’s your name?”

“Loilei.”

She held out her hand to him, the feathers rustling in the wind. He squeezed the wrist tightly.

“Hieronim Berbelek.”

The next day she found him again at the gate. This time — he saw it — she was already looking for him.

“Esthlos.”

He glanced at her suspiciously. She smiled mischievously.

“Grandpa is interested in politics” she said, sitting next to him in her place. ”He told me to stay away from you.”

“We never listen to Grandpas.“

“Vistul’s lightning, ha! So how many battles have you won?“

“Everyone. Except the last one.”

“He said you would tell me to stab myself with a knife and I would stab myself.”

He decided to have fun at her expense. He turned towards her, took her by the arm, and leaned towards the angel.

“Loilei” he whispered.

She opened her light blue eyes wider.

“Yes...?”

He waited, never taking his eyes off her. He didn’t blink, so she couldn’t blink either. He saw her breathing quicken. The arm in his grip began to tremble, the fur feathers rustling in fear. She opened her mouth, but was unable to make a sound. He squeezed harder. She groaned.

“What... do you want... me to...”

He laughed and let her go.

He turned back towards the cloudy abyss. He took out a cigarette and matches. He wanted to offer her tobacco, but when he held out his hand, she jumped up and ran, jumping off the wall in a leap a quarter of a stadium long. — quickly disappeared from his sight, white against white. Two days later, an anonymous messenger brought the first love letter from Loilei Leuzza to the Moon Court for Mr. Berbelek. She provided an address to which he could reply. He didn’t reply.

The next day another letter arrived. She wasn’t hysterical; she wrote calmly that she only dreamed about him and that she would wait for his return at the head of the army of Illeia the Cruel. He wrote to her not to wait. Loilei replied that if she did not meet him face to face, Hieronim would not force her to forget about him. Now Mr. Berbelek did not leave the Moon Court at all to avoid such an ”accidental” meeting. He refrained from further correspondence. Letters from the angel arrived every day, longer and longer. She described her life, ambitions, hopes, family history and the history of Oronea. Her Greek was stiff

and rather poor, but nevertheless it conveyed all the naive sincerity with which Loilei expressed her confidences. Mr. Berbelek should have burned these letters; instead, he hid them carefully behind the covers of his diary. He remembered how many similar declarations of love he received after each Victory. Why was he surprised? This was the form of the strategos: he conquered. He didn't plan it, he didn't want it, he didn't intend it. But it was in his nature.

In the hour of the most severe nightmares, somewhere between midnight and predawn, there was a long sound of a gong, sewing its metallic vibrations into the walls, wainscoting, floors, carpets and furniture of the Manor, under the blankets and into the dreams of its guests. They woke up immediately. No one had to rush them and explain what that sound meant. They had their luggage ready for a long time. They descended through the cold hall and from the covered veranda onto the meadow and the road to the Stairs, covered with snow that sparkled with all the colors of the Manor's fires. Doulos and servants swarmed with lamps and torches in their hands. The travelers marched in silence, heads bowed, against the wind, in the whirling petals of hydor — a nightly snowstorm had raged over Oroneia. Mr. Berbelek, Helena, the Gypsies, Dont, Katrina, spies and outlaws, deicides and idolaters, two dozen silhouettes wrapped in furs and cloaks. The snow in front of Mr. Berbelek was clean and smooth, each step breaking its frozen surface. But apart from that creaking and crunching — silence. Words were replaced by clouds of steam that escaped from his mouth at every step.

Even in deep snow, it doesn't take more than a dozen or so minutes to cross a stadium. Dozens of lanterns were hung around the Heavenly Stairway. The brightest glow of the orbs, however, came from above and behind the top of the Stairway, where the great hull of the moonboat glowed with a bright blue fire. Her name was *Urkaj* — which, in a language Mr. Berbelek didn't ask about, meant *Understar*. It was built in the heavenly shipyards for navigation through the spheres of Fire and Aether, and these elements formed the basis of its construction. Pyr meant heat and brightness, aether meant eternal circular motion. The *Urkaj* was constantly burning with star fire and spinning around itself.

They entered it on a rope bridge stretched over the black abyss; the inside of the boat was darker than the outside, and they could finally stop squinting. One last look behind you, while the wind is still splashing your face with frozen hydor: the path of fire and the darkend Oroneia behind the curtain of snow.

One last look at *Urkaj*, rotating around a horizontal axis along which they enter the mouth of this translucent scorpion: large pincers begin to unfurl into aether sails, clouds of steam erupt from the dust bunnies, a red glow runs around the reptilian rings of the *Understar*, the spiral tail accelerated in a thousand intricate eternal helices — a blooming perpetua mobilia rose. A burning man leans out of the scorpion's head, which is fixed on the axis of rotation, and is surrounded a cloud of snowy steam, blowing a black horn, uuuuuuuuuurrrmmm! It's time to leave the Earth.

Mr. Berbelek turned from the night and entered the light.

3 Januarius 1194. I'm starting my journal over again. I probably don't wield a pen with Elking's Dexterity, but I wouldn't forgive myself if I didn't write it down. The greatest fool is one who believes in his own memory.

We have now left the realm of aeru, the boat has entered the realm of pyr and aether. The Urkaj has two bellies: the inner, gesian belly, in which we live, and the outer, aether belly, which rotates around the inner one and through which we see the receding surface of the Earth, already bright because The Sun appeared above our heads — just like the Moon, and that's what we'll have to catch up with. Three hours ago we started to develop the main wings and we are still developing them.

It's getting hotter. Everyone takes off their clothes. Moon people go naked, their skin feels sickly hot to the touch — like Shulima's skin. They speak a strange Greek dialect; understandable, but irritating to the ear. They live in cabins in the aether head of Urkaj. I only saw a few, but the crew numbered at least three dozen. This is a huge boat. I walked along the lowest truss of its inner belly, counting the steps: two hundred and fourteen.

After supper — when the Sun overtook the Moon, emerging from behind it with a fiery arc — a black-haired Moonwoman in aether jewelry came and said that the captain wanted to see me, he would receive me at midnight. It seemed

to me that midnight struck shortly before our departure from Oronea, but they have different midnights and different noons here, other Gypsies designed moon clocks.

The sophistes Dont whispers to me so that I don't anger the captain (most of the passengers whisper, though no one overhears); that Fire flows in their veins, it doesn't take much to ignite the fury of the Moon folk; for me to humbly say hello and say nothing more. Fool. I put on a kirouffa made of white silk, and a dagger with the manticore blade is hidden in the sleeve without a sheath. I think: fury. Fury. Fury!

"The Oroneans say Lakatoia sends you."

"Who?"

"The Mistress of Evening. Her daughter. Shulima."

Omixos Zarnik, hegemon of the *Urkaj*, hosted Mr. Berbelek for a midnight breakfast in his private cabin at the bow of the boat. All four lower elements always tend towards the center of the universe, the center of the Earth, and however the passengers and crew moved around the boat, the Earth — black or green — they always had it under their feet, under the transparent pempton stoikheion shell. Aether bow cabins, the entire head of the scorpion remained motionless, which seemed to contradict the very nature of henosis. Omixos explained this secret of stellar mechanics to Mr. Berbelek without being asked, seeing the visitor's searching glances and the caution with which he stepped on the transparent floor. The art of Aether alkimia is precisely this: on taming the eternal circular motion of the arche of uranosis. This movement cannot be stopped, but its orbit and direction can be changed — and the "Understellar" is just such an intricate mechanism consisting of millions of circular movements of aetheric bodies. The movement of the boat head itself is a Proveg "hidden movement:" invisible from within, visible only in external comparison; possible thanks to the head being mounted on the fixed *Urkaj* axis. Mr. Berbelek tried to imagine it all very carefully according to the hegemon's words, and after a while he felt the food he had just swallowed coming back up his throat.

The dishes served by the doulos were mostly prepared from ingredients that did not come from Earth, and in any case, the flavors and smells were completely foreign to Mr. Berbelek. They burned in his mouth, he had to drink often and a lot; he asked for clean water, because the moon wine also burned his esophagus. It wasn't that the dishes were spicy or hot. Even sweet, cold lunar fruits (morphed apples, pears, oranges, arfags, plums) turned out to be difficult for Earth organisms to tolerate.

Omixos was opening kargata shells with his long thumbnail — after splitting, the kargats burst into short fire — and swallowed the burning fruit whole. When he laughed, and he laughed loudly almost constantly, sparks flew from his mouth, nostrils, and the corners of his eyes.

"Ryter pyru, hyppyres, Fire Rider" he said to Mr. Berbelek when he hissed, withdrawing his hand from the welcome embrace that was burning his skin. "We will go into battle."

They will go into battle — what battle? Of course, Hieronim couldn't ask about it; Omixos assumed that Mr. Berbelek had this knowledge, and admitting ignorance now would be a sign of weakness, an act of undoubted self-humiliation.

The Hyppyroi were apparently a sort of knightly caste among the Lunars. Because only one Fire Rider was aboard the *Urkaj* — her captain — Mr. Berbelek couldn't distinguish what in his morph belonged to the hyppyroi morph and what exclusively to the Omixos morph. The hegemon was as tall as Mr. Berbelek, and under his skin there were knots of muscle twisting like polished brass, reaching down — like in an anatomical model — from broad shoulders to strong arms, through the torso and concave belly, to the clearly cut muscles of the thighs and calves. The Hyppyres was naked, completely hairless, the surface of the perfectly spherical skull reflected the light of the Sun, Earth and stars, piercing the aetheric walls of the *Understar*'s head.

The cabin was decorated very modestly, probably so as not to obscure the panorama of space — no furniture, no decorations, a few rugs and pillows thrown on the floor. What dampened the glow of the stars the most was the immanent light of the boat, as well as the pyr heat burning it inwards.

"Lakatoia, The Mistress of Evening — how many times have I taken her down and back? The last time was probably a year and a half ago, yes; and she told me that she seemed to have finally found a man. This is already going

too far, there is no point in waiting, the Lady should make a decision as soon as it started in Oceanus, in the southern islands, and in Gaudat's Land, in the Southern Ice, who knows what is happening there, in the frost, in the snow flurries. Lakatoia wanted me to come down there straight from the sky, but the *Urkaj* couldn't stand the cold. I know, the Lady has her reasons, old hatreds, why would she finally save those who banished her? — but it came to us first. Will you visit the Inverted Prison? Have me take you. You have to strike as quickly as possible."

Strike. As soon as possible. Mr. Berbelek chewed the peas in silence. They are using me, as I knew Shulima would use me, a blind tool. (Fury!) Did she really not want Abel dead? It certainly did not hinder Shulima's plans. Fury! But that's what they want from me.

He batted his hands and looked up at the round shadow of the Moon, the *Understar* chased it on its lower hatch; The Sun, in its daily orbit around the Earth, was now completely invisible behind the Moon, which orbited the Earth at almost the same pace — but this change was due to the change in the position of the boat, not to astronomical mechanics. However, the Sun is faster than the Moon and will eventually emerge from behind it (or from underneath it if the boat changes its orbital plane). Then black silks will be drawn around the inner belly of the *Urkaj* to prevent the Earthlings from going blind. But what will the Moon folk themselves do in her head?

"Nothing has been decided" said Mr. Berbelek, watching the moonlight for the lights of Illeia's cities at night. "If the price is right..."

Omixos Zarnik burst into laugher until dozens of tiny flames lit up on his biceps and chest, as if he was sweating fire directly through the open pores of his skin.

"You want to bargain with her! You throw Illeia a price and 'you either agree or disagree!' Hah!

"If her daughter spent so much time... I think she'll have to agree."

"Ha!" The Fire Rider wiped the golden sparks from his eyes. "I would like to see that!"

"Say" Mr. Berbelek looked at the Hyppyres "what is the appropriate price

for a firstborn son?“

“Ah!“

Omixos was silent for a moment. He poured himself some wine and water for the guest.

“Revenge” he finally said.

“Yes.”

“Who do you blame? Illeia?“

“It seems to me that they want to buy my revenge, that’s how they planned it. I don’t know if I would even go there now if it weren’t for revenge. I don’t think I’ve ever thought about ”revenge” myself. But now I see that this is the Form. This is what it looks like from their side. Did he have to die? I don’t know anything. But it helped.“

Omixos became serious and scratched his bare skull. He looked at Mr. Berbelek inquisitively through heavy eyelids. An exceptionally bright star was rising over his right shoulder — Nervous?

“You honor me with your honesty” he muttered; he really looked uncomfortable, it wasn’t ironic. “What can I tell you, Esthlos? only saw Lady Illeia once, from a distance, when she was paying homage to the hyppyroi. I’m not a sage. But. But yes. Why do they call her The Cruel? Illeia. She sent her only daughter down among her greatest enemies and into the jaws of the greatest danger.”

Mr. Berbelek nodded.

Until the end of the conversation, his form remained on the melancholy side. As he stood up to leave, watching the *Urkaj*’s hegemon open the door for him and thank him with a short bow for the morph of clear sincerity, Mr. Berbelek realized that he had actually won and subjugated the Hyppyres, although he had not planned it that way; that this is also a method and these are the paths to ascend to thrones. Despite the pain, he gripped Omixos’s wrist tightly.

“Lakatoia was right” said Zarnik. “She chose well, Esthlos. This is exactly what we need.“

"Who?"

"A Kratisticide."

5 Januarius 1194. Wings fully extended, huge sheets of aether, five or seven stadia long. They cannot be seen directly, the light passes right through them; only their ribs, a hard supporting structure, like veins in giant cosmic leaves, only they are visible against the background of the stars. Now I will write down how it was explained to me: aether revolves around the Earth in orbits that depend on its density, speed and the type of arche with which it is associated (pyr in the case of the Sun). To climb from the Earth to the Moon's orbit, the boat must catch higher and higher uranosis in its "sails" until it aligns with the Moon's epicycle; the tail then serves as an additional rudder. In this way you tack through the celestial spheres.

Those who whispered were right. The sounds ran through the hot air filling the interior of the boat, hundreds of pous along secret aetheric orbits, flowing — like mountain streams — into the dark corners and open intersections of the *Urkaj*'s goose-like skeleton. Whoever knew where the invisible orbits intersected could eavesdrop on everyone. This is how Marianna Heltites was overheard when she tried to bribe one of the Gypsies with her charms to make an aether poison; The Gypsy asked who it was for, she did not answer, but everyone knew well. One of the *Urkaj*'s navigators overheard it. She told the hegemon. There was no interrogation, trial, questions about guilt, or pleas for confession. Omixos ordered Marianna thrown overboard.

They tied her hands behind her back, and fastened a purinic chain around her left ankle. The lunar doulos dragged her to the stern of the boat, attached the chain to the scorpion's tail, and pushed the girl out into the void. All this was perfectly visible through the bright walls of the *Understar*; The lunars did not look, but the passengers gathered at the stern. Arianna sobbed silently, rubbing her forehead against the hot uranoise. Mr. Berbelek stood behind her, clutching her arm. The priestess's daughter was spinning on a long chain around the tail of the *Urkaj* that was vibrating with a thousand everlasting orbits. She must have been screaming, judging by her wide open mouth, but they could not hear anything inside the boat. For the first hour she thrashed about on the

tether, trying to free herself from the chain or pull herself to the tail; to no avail. Then her clothes began to smolder, falling off in larger pieces. Her hair slowly turned to ash as well. She coughed and scratched her throat, there was not enough air, too much dust, her lungs couldn't take it. In the third hour, her hip caught on the epicycle of some larger uranosis clot and the aether pierced her body, ripping through her skin and muscles and crushing her bones. The fire immediately cauterized the wound. In the fourth hour, she lost consciousness. In the sixth, she woke up again; her skin was already burning, the aether was eating into her bleeding flesh, and her face was a brown mask of skull and blood vessels. In the seventh hour, the Sun emerged from behind the Moon.

7 Januarius 1194. We have caught up with the Moon. We are entering its sphere of Air. The Sun has already overtaken the Moon for good, the spheres of aether have blazed red, white and blue. We live here in a cocoon of black silks, only safe behind them. The Moon people walk around in ommators made of carbon crystals, they look as if angular stones have grown out of their eye sockets.They say that this is the end, that we will land today or tomorrow. We started to furl the sails, the black surface of the Moon below us, suddenly this is the center of the universe, not the Earth above our heads, the cosmos has turned, I don't understand it, there can't be two centers.The scorpion's tail beats like crazy, the aether armor swirls in the lunar air. We fall into darkness.

N.
Our Lady's Light

Our Lady's light burns, burns, burns everything, air, water, earth, the body of Mr. Berbelek. Even when he stands motionless under a black sky — the green Earth in the middle of a uniformly dark firmament the only source of light, the night enshrouded by the Moon, a long, two-week night — even now the dust, here associated with every particle of animate and inanimate matter, eats through the kirouffa, through the skin, into the bones and into Mr. Berbelek's heart. Every breath stings the throat and pricks the lungs, every swallow of saliva burns the larynx, every step is a new heat of the earth under the soles of the feet (Moon folk walk barefoot), every movement is movement through hell.

Of course, there are no flames, no ash, the kirouffa does not smoke, Mr. Berbelek's skin has only reddened, as if in a sickly tan. The Sun has not yet overtaken the Moon enough to appear in the sky above the edge of the Midas Crater — but the density of arche pyr in the Moon's atmosphere does not depend on the time of day, the time of month.

For despite the fact that the Kratista Illeia has spent over half a thousand years here, she has still not managed to draw this globe into a form completely consistent with her nature — human, earthly, life-giving, ordered. Substance is created from such Matter as is available at the moment. The Moon of the Lady of Blessings is born from the Fire of the highest sphere of the Earth, from pure uranosis and from lower elements, successively released from the aetheric cyphers, in which they are bound in the boiling of all celestial bodies. These

fields, these gardens, orchards, vineyards, which Mr. Berbelek now looks at from the back of the spielnik, all of this came into being and grew from the elements spontaneously cleansed of uranosis in the crown of the Moon Witch. Thus, on the scale of centuries and millennia, the black, dead Moon flows towards the Form of paradise, a golden land of fertility and happiness, such as the Potnia was not allowed to create on the Sadara.

In the meantime, however, this is a land of suffering for Mr. Berbelek. He walks slowly and speaks only in whispers, refraining from taking deep breaths.

The spielnik stretched along the entire estate of Omixos, all the way to the eastern slope of the crater. Similar veins of uranoise are visible from Earth as lighter stripes on the face of the Moon, places that reflect light more strongly.

Several decades ago, the surface of this spielnik had been smoothed and now it served as the main internal road of the estate (these lunar latifundia were called imopatras). It led from the Dynastos grove itself, in the southwest, to the Carousel in the northeast: a scar of purinic aether protruding from the earth of the Moon like its exposed bone, a white shinbone hundreds of stadia long.

From the ridge of the spielnik, from a height of several dozen pous, a royal view stretched out over the cultivated fields of the gryzu and orchards, where Omixos' peasants and slaves worked. The Midas crater was also the source of one of the most popular types of moon wines — it was with it that Zarnik treated Mr. Berbelek on board the *Urkaj*, Midas wine.

In the green light of the Earth, this entire panorama gave the impression of being immersed in an undersea shadow, as if the Imopatra of Midas was actually lying at the bottom of an ocean, whose waters had been made breathable by some mysterious alkimic transmutation.

Aurelia Kruzos, running along the top of the spielnik, overtook Hieronim by a good stadium; now she turned back. Omixos Zarnik's niece was also a born Hyppyres, the hard musculature of her hairless body could have been used as a model for a statue of Artemis the Hunter. A Hyppyres, the more energy he moves with, the greater the momentum a given part of his body has, the more dust precipitates on the surface of his dark skin. Aurelia, running at a trot, burned fiery streaks in the air with every jerk of her legs and arms, the afterimage of which cut Hieronim's pupils; around her forearms, which she waved the most, manes of white flames erupted for fractions of a second. Even

when she stopped after running, slightly out of breath, small flames danced on her breasts, arms, skull.

"It's not far, behind the palm trees."

He had no desire to explain to her that these crusty trees with red-hot leaves shared only a name with the palm morph.

Behind the pyr palms, a low branch of the pearl aether detached itself from the spire, half a stadium away, covered with lattice structures, towers and girders, around which bustling activity took place. two dozen people, twice as many doulos. There, uranois eternals rotated on crooked axes — the tireless drive of the winches, lowering down into the brightly lit windows, strands of thick ropes and black chains. It was in such deep lunar mines that pure pempton stoikheion was mined, unmixed with the arche of the lower elements; then the aetheric smiths, the demiurgoi uranoisis, took it into their hands and distorted its epicycles, changing its motion from a circular motion around the Earth, as the rest of the Moon moves in its aetheric nature, to a new orbit: small as the circumference of a finger — for a jeweler for a swirl ring — or about a stadium average — to the Carousel — or somewhere in between, to some industrial perpetual motion machine. In the past, the Midas uranosis mine brought higher profits and was exploited more intensively; it now opened and closed depending on price fluctuations in the lunar aether market.

Aurelia ran down to the square next to the main tower above the central shaft. Several people were already waiting for her, they bowed their heads, a doulos fell to his knees. Before Mr. Berbelek reached them — going down to the granary with an even, calm step that, while masking the suffering of the body, imposed a form of certain dignity — they managed to report the incident to Aurelia and give directions; she ran, waving at Hieronim. Mr. Berbelek stopped for a moment in the shadow of the tower, amid the roar of the angular eternal machines. They bowed their heads again. He looked at them indifferently. They fell to their knees, free and slave together. He passed them in silence. He had not hidden his face under the hood for some time now, his opposite reflexes were coming back to him, anonymity is a form of weak people.

Hounded into an alley under a heap of ground spoil, a monster was thrashing helplessly in all directions. Mr. Berbelek blinked and focused his eyes. In fact, the anaires did not move, it was simply composed of motion, the aether was his body, high-energy uranosis accelerated in a million disjointed epicycles.

Everything in it was spinning, turning around itself, body around body, if we can talk about body at all, because where are the arms, where are the legs, where is the head, where is the torso, there is none, there is nothing, eternal movement blurs the contours, where the skin, where muscles, where blood — but it's all rushing, sparking at the intersections of orbits, rubbing against the ground and thrashing the air, not limbs, but bundles of epicycles, not a body, but the axis of an axis, not eyes and ears, but great circles of swift aether, cutting through the space around the monster, like the antennae of an insect: whatever it touches, what disturbs movement, information about it goes to the body. This is the only sense of the anaires, this cloud of aetheric particles sprayed into a dozen pous around the creature.

As soon as Aurelia Kruzos entered it, the monster tore itself even deeper into the alley, smashing its organs/orbits against the slopes of the heap converging there. At the same time, it bristled with a grating crackle and rattle with shiny epicycles of uraniose blades, spikes, and burrs — and all of them rushing faster and faster, a panicked tornado of aetheric garbage; how terrified it must have been!

Aurelia looked over her shoulder at Mr. Berbelek. She grinned, excited. On her back, along her spine, and around the long muscles of her arms, blue and red tongues of fire unfurled.

"Esthlos! Look!"

She lunged forward, straight at the monster. It was so sudden that for a split second she disappeared from Hieronim's sight, he was standing too close — anyway, it would have disappeared from him anyway, he had to shield his face, the blast of fire hit him like the soft fist of Helios. He managed to recreate Aurelia's movement from the afterimage burned into her pupils — how, surrounded by a pillar of dust, she runs into the monster and, reaching out with her right hand, tears it apart into empty chaos. There was a bang, as if a mekanikosa forge or workshop had been blown up, and then in all directions — including Mr. Berbelek, who was covering his head with his forearm — there was a downpour of small fragments of aether, released into open orbits from under the morph of the killed animal.

The Pyr Ryter turned to Mr. Berbelek. Hissing through clenched teeth, she wiped the parched blood from thousands of wounds from her skin. Most of the enemy's aether was burned in her fire, but even while burning, it harmed the

girl's body. In the deepest cut, on the left ribs, a bright heat sizzled, a stripe of cruel white from the breast to the navel.

"Oh" she gasped, moving uncertainly towards Hieronim.

"That was a lot. In a minute. I'll sit down."

Mr. Berbelek made a short gesture towards the dozen or so miners gathered at the other end of the heap. They ran up, took the Hyppyres by the arms, and led her out to the granary. Someone brought a flowerpot and spread it on the ground, someone else carried a bottle of wine, two doulos took an amphora of purine hydor and began to wash Aurelia, until she barely rested on the flowerbed. Mr. Berbelek sat down next to her, crossing his legs.

Onlookers were coming from everywhere, and the noise of their whispered conversations was growing.

"Away!" Mr. Berbelek growled.

Whoever he looked at, unable to ignore the Esthlos gaze, quickly retreated out of his reach. Less than five minutes later, even the mine elevator supervisors hid.

Kruzos also drove away the doulos with a curse. Sighing loudly, she stretched out on her back on the violet flowerbed. Hieronim slowly reached for the bottle and the goblet and poured himself some wine. Three days have passed since Mr. Berbelek arrived on the Moon— three days, because they circled the Earth three times, the shapes of brown continents and green seas repeated three times over Mr. Berbelek, they included them in a similar painting of light and shadow. Hieronim saw it all the better because the black sky with the motionless Earth was the only roof of the lunar houses, no multi-story buildings were built here, and there was no point in covering the single-story ones. Rain fell very rarely (they were talked about for months), there were no strong winds, and the temperature was constant. Once a month, at sunrise, a long wave of thick fog passed over the lunar surface, which then condensed into puddles of purinic hydor. — it was the Day of Purification. The Moon people lived in open spaces, rarely escaping between walls.

The dynastic grove of the Zarnik family was just that: a grove, a grove of cleverly morphed trees and shrubs, a regular labyrinth of the fiery flora of the

Moon. For the first dozen or so hours, Mr. Berbelek — having barely disembarked from the *Understar*, which immediately continued its journey, Omixos only had time to say hello to his family and hand over Hieronim to his brother's care — for the first day, Mr. Berbelek lay on the hot ground of his glade, burned through and through by the moon's pyru air, sometimes sleeping, sometimes waking up, with the Earth above his head, watched over by the household doulos who washed his body with cool water, but even this brought no relief , because this spring-cold hydration also burned his skin, turning it pink from the dust dissolved in it.

This was Mr. Berbelek's Day of Purification. Lying there in silent agony, burning from within and without, alone with his rasping breath and the wonderfully beautiful planet before his eyes, Hieronim underwent the ritual of purification of his soul.

Is it really what he feels, this undirected, silent rage, the prickly machine of anger in his chest, filmed somewhere under the terrible African sun? — so is it revenge that moves him, the desire to take revenge for his son? What is this desire if not a kind of desire to make amends for hurting one's pride? This is how aristocrats take revenge: by equality of humiliation. Suffering degradation, weakness felt and shown degradations, longing degradations, love degradations — in other people's eyes and in your own eyes. After all, the point is not to make the deceased feel better if the perpetrator of his death dies; no compensation will help the deceased. It is true that one may believe in one or another of the laws that govern the world and act in accordance with that belief; however, this was not the case of Mr. Berbelek, who was accustomed to order death in such numbers, that he simply couldn't afford to suspect the existence of any afterlife. One can also find motives for revenge in the pursuit of justice. However, while revenge is the administration of justice, it is not revenge; and while justice is revenge, it is not justice. However, it did not occur to Mr. Berbelek to look for salvation in measures of justice — this is the way of the doulos. He always takes revenge himself and for himself.

Because it is also a Form, and how powerful it is — the father-avenger! Certainly stronger than the old lover's Form. Do we need additional motives? Just as he planned his desire for Shulima — when he wasn't yet lusting after her — he saw himself in the same way today in these new characters: Berbelek the Kratislayer, Berbelek the Lunar Strategos. They were mutually exclusive, but neither mattered; the avenger father was fading into the shadows anyway.

If he killed Illeia now, it would not be out of revenge.

Kill Illeia — because Omixos Zarnik's words were still ringing in his ears. He did not inquire what the thought was behind them; the imagination already had a life of its own. Kratisticide! He felt this morph slowly and inexorably drawing him in, like the snake of a hypnotized rabbit.

Kill Illeia — he was unable to draw the dagger and thread it on her daughter. So, thinking about today's morph — Mr. Berbelek burning in silence in the Midas grove, under the green Earth — he didn't see a chance for himself here. It seemed much more likely that he would fall into an alternate Form. Strategos of the Moon. The Lady's armies. The greatest battle of all time. They knew they would tempt him. He wouldn't be himself if he refused the offer. Revenge? This is also selfishness, just of a different color. Besides, the cause of Abel's death was the same as the cause of every man's death: Abel died because he was Abel. If he were anyone else, he would still be alive. Either way, Abel's time in this world is over.

But then Mr. Berbelek closed his eyes and the avenger father won again for a moment. That was my son! If it weren't for Shulima! If it weren't for The Skoliodoi! If it weren't for Illeia!

The flameless fire cleansed him of false thoughts and accidental forms.

He finally got to his feet and straightened in pain — Hieronim Berbelek and everything that is him and nothing that is not him.

They told him that after a week or two, Earthlings adapt, the pyr enters their bodies, the arche ratios even out, and eventually they don't even feel pain while living in the Moon's atmosphere. This is how Elking described it. Mr. Berbelek said to himself: on the second day I walk, on the third day I eat and drink and have social conversations, on the fourth day I am a Moon man. The plan was only partially successful. You can impose a pain-ignoring morph on your body, but you cannot impose a body-ignoring morph on the world. Unless you're that crazy of a kratistos.

"I thought you had more sense. They could have beaten it to death with sticks. True? I don't think this is the usual way, that charge of yours. Here, have a drink."

She was scratching the hot wound with her left hand.

“I saw my father kill one like that. These are the weakest anaires, those from the center of her anthos. Indeed, they could have handled it themselves. But the law is the law.

”Does it happen a lot?”

”Nope. Hardly at all. But when you restart the mine, something always jumps out of the darkness. It’s stupid, weak, confused; they herd him into a corner and send a messenger to the grove.” She stood up and took a deep breath. She jumped several times, hit her breastbone with her fist, waved her arms, and the flames roared. ”Once, in the beginning, when the Lady came to the Moon of bare Aether rock and Fire scattered in orbital gales, they were the only natural form of life here. Anaires, Excavated from the Depths. How the vilest vermin are born, from water, dung, mud, warm earth, damp dirt — it’s the same downstairs, isn’t it?”

”Yes. The beginning of life, spontaneous generation. Roundworms, flies, cockroaches, earthworms.”

”Exactly. A living morph moves a dead hile. She sat back down and poured herself more wine. — So back then there was only The Lady and uranoise hile. On the border of Ileia’s Anthos, where the weakest balance and the Form were broken, self-born beasts of dirty elements began to emerge from the depths of the murdered Moon. Thousands, tens of thousands of anaires surrounded people, attacked, destroyed crops, and broke young trees. They even tried to get to Illeia herself.”

”Were they acting in concert? You talk as if they had a plan.”

”Yeah, like a herd. I don’t know.” She slapped her thigh with her open hand. ”That’s what the historians write. In any case, many people died. Then the Lady created the Fire Riders to protect people from the anaires, and the Lady gave birth to Hierokris the Fair. For we can go beyond the anthos of Illeia, into the wild Moon, into the emptiness of pyr and aether, we can fight in the celestial spheres, under the Sun and in darkness, in the course of cosmic epicycles. Find and kill the anaires on the very border of the Lady’s country and beyond, before they enter the inhabited lands — where they are born spontaneously, or even better, kill the unborn, still dead. It’s been like this for centuries — we are

on guard. The Lady's Anthos already covers almost the entire Low Side, the border is far from here, but it is much longer than it was then. They are no longer born so often, not in such numbers."

"Eventually, llleia will enclose the entire Moon in her corona."

"Yes, someday. Maybe then we will become like you. They say that down on Earth, a Ryter is just an honorary title that you can buy, even if you have never fought and will never fight for anything; that even aristocrats buy these titles for nothing."

"That's true."

"My parents, my grandparents and great-grandparents, my cousins and sister, they're all Hyppyroi. Our morphs are sharp and strong, we could live for a hundred, a hundred and fifty years. That's what they say. But no one dies of old age. The Hyppyroi die in battle.

"You will die this way."

"Yes." She put down the goblet and lay down on the flower bed again, putting her hands under her head. "There are no cemeteries. When the Form breaks, the dust wins and burns us to ashes, the earth swallows us where we die, the Moon swallows us.“

"Family legends..." Mr. Berbelek muttered. "Yes, it's probably meant for you. Have you never imagined a different future? You know, children rebel. Form against form: copy or reverse."

She laughed.

"But this is my rebellion!"

"Against what? Against whom?"

"Against myself. I imagined myself and chose the me I became. I. Aurelia Kruzos. Because I want to."

"That's it."

"Well, of course I'm curious what it's like there." She pointed to the Earth suspended above them in the middle of the dark sky. "Do you think I could...?

But it's okay to just fly back and forth with uncle — only to roam freely on the surface, in disguise, in cities, among people. Esthlos? But isn't this too dangerous? What would you think?"

"That you are a demiurgos of fire."

"I am a demiurgos of fire."

"Ha!"

Suddenly Mr. Berbelek turned around on the flower bed and leaned over Aurelia.

"Do you want to?"

"What?"

"Because I'll go back there. Sooner or later. Omixos notified them long ago, they will send for me. Whatever plans you have for me... If I need to be a strategos... I will go back there. With or without an army. So how?"

Sparks began to shoot from the corners of the hyppyres' wide eyes, and wisps of smoke appeared between her brown lips.

"As who?"

Now he laughed.

"No, child, I do not dream of a night's burnt offering, let's leave the burning beds to the poets. As mine — my soldier.

She sat down.

"I won't swear to you."

"Whose oath am I asking you to take?"

"Esthlos..."

She sensed a trap, but was too young to recognize it.

The most dangerous are those who do not need any oaths.

She scratched at the hot wound thoughtfully.

Looking at Mr. Berbelek, she tilted her head, puffed out her cheek, and raised a hairless eyebrow sculpted from black coral.

He knew this form.

"The Lady of Evening is waiting for me" She said "I'll go back there, with or without you."

He held out his hand. She grabbed his forearm with an energetic movement and squeezed it.

He winced in pain. It's burning, it's burning, everything's burning.

HIEROKHARIS, son of Hierokris, son of the Kratista Illeia Kollotropia, Lady of the Moon, kyrios, kyrios, kyrios, The First Hyppyres, The Fire in Her Hand, The Hegemon of the Moon, to the Esthlos Hieronim Berbelek, The Strategist of Europe, in the hospitality of the Ryter Omixos Zarnik, in welcome and with gifts of the earth , thrice, he came.

The sound of the gong carried through the grove, passing in a long wave through the fiery hedges and the thickets of embers wrapped around the skeletons of the arbor. It was the sixth day of Lord Berbelek's stay on the Moon, the hour of Herdon (Herdon shone from under the border of shadow that crossed the Earth).

Hierokharis arrived in an aether carriage, drawn by two apoxes, lunar horses with fiery manes and tails. He was accompanied by a modest retinue: two Hyppyroi, a secretary, and a dozen servants. The servants carried a chest of gifts from the carriage. They opened it before Esthlos Hieronim Berbelek, sitting under the willow of the feasting glade. In the chest whirled aetherial masterpieces of lunar craftsmanship, splendid costumes of an illeic cut burned with starry heat.

Mr. Berbelek stood up, bowed his head. Hierokharis approached him, smiling broadly and as effusive in gesture and manner as all Hyppyroi, their characters fiery as their bodies, hot cordiality or hellish anger; he approached, shook Mr. Berbelek's wrist, clapped him on the shoulder.

"Esthlos! I had to see for myself if she had chosen well this time!"

Mr. Berbelek smiled with restraint. A thousand new suspicions exploded in his head. "This time"! But he said nothing.

In the Midai grove they were planning a great feast in honour of the Lady's grandson, but Hierokharis quickly announced that he was leaving as soon as Esthlos Berbelek had packed. What did Hieronim have to pack, all his luggage still fit in one backpack — and in that trunk with gifts, which the servants of the Hegemon of the Moon immediately carried back to the carriage. The farewells also did not last long, short handshakes, with Aurelia Kruzos just as short, only she smiled wider and brighter sparks shot in her eyes. Mr. Berbelek laced up his kirouffa again, tightened the straps of his dagger's scabbard, pressed the white tube of the amulet to his nostril, counted to seven — and left the grove.

A carriage —a roofless, openwork uranoise machine, with six enormous wheels and six even larger flywheels, perpetua mobilia, spinning continuously high above its structure. They were latched onto the lower axles for the duration of the journey and moved upwards to stop the carriage's movement. The entire upper part of the carriage was also made of aether, composed of symmetrical epicycles of uranoise fans, opening and closing canopies, softly clapping hydropore nets.

The carriage of the First Hyppyres, forty pous long, fifteen pous wide, was not really pulled by this pair of apoxes — with them the driver used the reins and a fiery whip to change the direction of travel, which could no longer be done solely by manipulating the fixed orbits of the perpetual machines.

The driver shouted, cracked his whip, the horses snorted smoke, the perpetua mobilia fell onto the cogs of the iron wheels — they set off.

Hierokharis and Mr. Berbelek sat in the middle of the carriage, in front of the grates securing the luggage and behind the lower servants' compartment, partly hidden under the driver's seat. The floor of the carriage was also made of hardwood grates, only more elegantly carved and creating more complex skeletons. Mr. Berbelek watched the Earth through them, rushing by faster and faster. Soon they entered the smelter, the aetherial bone of the Moon gleaming under the feet of the passengers.

"We must make it before Dies Solis, Illeia wants to speak with you before she leaves for Rakatoshu's birthday."

Mr. Berbelek raised a questioning eyebrow.

Hierokharis waved his hand to the south.

"A new city, a thousand stadia from the equator."

The lunar equator was plotted on maps of the globe along the line of Earth's light and the border of the Dark Side.

"Midas lies — what, six hundred stadia from the Labyrinth?" muttered Mr. Berbelek. "Quick."

"We sold a few of these carriages to the Gaudat Lands, where they have large, flat deserts where even the most resilient animals die." Hierokharis nodded at the green lantern in the sky. The southern, trapezoidal continent was not yet visible. "But it turned out that the sophistae were right, in such low spheres the aether is too unstable, after a few weeks the makinas start to fall apart, the uranoise breaks away to higher orbits, each element strives for its own sphere."

"In Herdon, they supposedly tested automatons powered by aether with an aethetic Form."

The Hegemon slapped his hand against his thigh.

"Now that is more like it"

They reached the eastern slope of the crater, left the slag pit, making a wide semicircle to enter the Carousel's ramp. The driver pulled a lever carved with dragons and manticores and raised the flywheels of the carriage. The apoxes pulled the cart slowly, approaching the edge of the ramp. The gigantic Carousel, an purpetua mobilia constructed on a hoop of white aether several stadiums long, rotated with starlike slowness: from the bottom to the top of the crater almost two hours. But it was also thanks to this slowness that the Hegemon's cart could safely enter one of the Ge platforms built into the uranoise hoop. The platforms were constantly stabilizing themselves to a level, creaking in suspension on axles as thick as a baobab tree trunk.

The passengers got out of the carriage. Mr. Berbelek approached the railing — the bottom of the Midas Crater was already receding, the perspective of the panorama of fields, orchards, vineyards, groves immersed in a light green glow was gradually changing. Mr. Berbelek raised his head. High above the ridge

of the crater slope, the fires of the upper ramp burned, a symmetrical triangle pushed out of the shadow of the slope into the starry sky.

The carousel creaked and scraped, something shot sharply in the axis of the platform every now and then, the aetherial vortices of the carriage clattered, the pyr horses neighed anxiously.

"How is she?" asked Hierokharis, stopping at the balustrade next to Mr. Berbelek.

"Hmm?"

"We haven't seen each other for over twenty years."

Mr. Berbelek took tobacco from his kirouffa pocket, and carefully chose a long tobacco pipe. He didn't have time to reach for the matches, The Hyppyres snapped his fingers, and blue fire shot out from under his fingernails.

"Thank you. When I last saw her, she was doing quite well."

Hierokharis laughed heartily.

"Oh, I would have recognized her men just by the sarcasm! Damien still can't decide who to hate."

"Damien?"

"Szard. Maybe you'll meet him. But he recently moved to Erzu, beyond the Sea of Ravens.

Damien Shard, Damien Shard — yes, Aneis wrote about him in his reports. Shulima's previous Alexandrian lover, who supposedly died on Okeanus. He didn't die on Okeanus.

"He didn't have the fame of a great strategos." Mr. Berbelek blew, the smoke flickered in the dust-saturated atmosphere.

Hierokharis looked strangely at Hieronim.

"What did she actually tell you, Esthlos? The fact that you're a strategos is an additional blessing; we weren't looking for a strategos, after all."

Mr. Berbelek straightened up, turned to the Hyppyres. He was taller than

him by more than a touk.

"I will take your power away from you," he said. "If the Lady entrusts me with command." He shook the ashes from the tobacco, put his right foot forward, and placed his left hand on the railing. "Such is the inevitable consequence. Will you humble yourself when she demands?"

Short flames shot out around Hierokharis's skull and shoulders. The servants stopped talking, the secretary took two steps toward him. The carousel creaked loudly in the moonlight silence.

Mr. Berbelek did not look away. He slowly raised the tobacco to his lips.

"Ha!" Hierokharis laughed suddenly. "You really don't know what awaits you! Esthlos!" Do you think that the two before you— that the Lady rejected them? No. We kept looking, because they turned out to be too weak.“

“And you?"

“I know I'm too weak. This isn't about seeing battle."

“You're looking for a Kratisticide."

Hierokharis tilted his head.

“Yes, you could say that. Although of course it will be a thousand times harder.“

Mr. Berbelek snorted. History does not know of a case where a kratista or kratistos died at the hands of anyone other than an even stronger kratista or kratistos; only dull folk repeat the fables of Isidore of Rhodes and heroic shepherds ascending to thrones. By definition, whoever defeated a krastistos is truly the Most Powerful. A thousand times harder? This is gibberish.

“Why don't you tell me this clearly and without allusions?"

“Since Shulima didn't tell you... The Lady will know how best to throw the net at you.“ The Hyppyres bared his white teeth. “Esthlos. Besides, it's still a secret.“

“Ryter Zarnik knew."

"Yes, some of the Hyppyroi have already fought their first skirmishes."

Mr. Berbelek threw his cigarette butt off the platform, towards the distant Midaic fields.

They were getting closer to the top of the crater.

"But you wanted to see me before I even stood face to face with the Lady. You expect her to make me such an offer and you will have to give me your place."

"Yes, I wanted to meet you before she meets you. As long as you are that Hieronim Berbelek, whom Shulima wrote to me about."

When they left the Carousel on the outer slope of the Midas Crater, a panorama of the lunar kingdom of Illeia opened up before them, plains, valleys, rivers, lakes and seas, lower craters and lower mountains, all the way to the horizon, not very distant after all, since the Moon is much smaller than the Earth, 35,000 stadia in circumference, as Hierokharis informed Mr. Berbelek during one of his rare stops.

The drivers took turns on the box, the apoxys could run non-stop for a dozen or so days without getting tired or needing sleep, their organisms are in tune with the monthly solar cycle — and the perpetua mobilia never tired. So they sped across the Moon, almost never stopping, an elaborate machine of silver aether, quivering in a thousand intricate orbits — a streak of frayed light to the eyes of the Moon-folk they passed. The Moon was covered with a network of The Lady's Paths, partly using the ridges of natural slag heaps, partly morphed from cinder ge; the network grew denser the closer they came to the heart of Illeia's anthos. The traffic on them also grew denser — but they did not slow down. All other travelers gave way to the carriage of the Lady's descendant, visible from afar. Indeed, it was a land of harmony, of natural order so deeply imprinted in the keros that it was probably no longer written down in any laws. Only now did Mr. Berbelek realize who he was actually sitting next to in the aetheric carriage, who he had challenged and who had backed down from him, had truly bowed and yielded: The Lord of the Moon, the second person on it after the Kratista Illeia, the wielder of a military power whose true dimensions Hieronim was only beginning to guess.

In the meantime, they talked about banalities, exchanged anecdotes, Hi-

erokharis told the history of the places they passed, Mr. Berbelek — funny and terrible legends about the Moon circulating on Earth. Hierokharis also fell into melancholic memories of his childhood spent with Shulima several times. He was almost a hundred years younger than her. She was the first to take him on trips to the pyr forests, with her he was the first to sail the hot seas of the Moon, under her watchful eye he shot his first anaires, to her he whispered in secret about his first loves, at her command he carried out his first sentence, cutting out the heart of a cacanthrope. They came from the seed of different men (Shulima's father was Adam Amitace, teknites psyche, grandfather of Hierokharis — Urax, ares), but Illeia's morph was strongest in them and the similarity was bonded.

"Do you remember him?" asked Mr. Berbelek.

"Who?"

"Her father, Esthlos Amitace."

"He died before I was born."

"Ah. Well, yes. The fate of mortals loved by the gods."

"At least you assume that she really loved him" laughed Hierokharis. "Thanks for that too."

"She loved him, but he had to love her. Between the strong and the weak there is no love, friendship, respect, visibility. There is only rape."

"That's what they say" Hierokharis muttered. "Perhaps, however, for the truly powerful Kratistos, even this impossibility becomes possible.

At the hour of Asia in the Dies Solis— and the Sun was really rising above the Moon, having far outstripped it in its monthly race around the Earth — the carriage passed the Throne Pass and descended to the Abazon, the central plateau wrapped around the shore of the Sea of Abortion. From the powder dissolved in its waters, the high waves of the shallow sea took on a pale pink in the sunlight, and at night — dirty, boiled sugar.

The Labyrinth stretched out on The Abazon. The Lady's home, the seal of her aura, the City of Harmony, the capital of the Moon, the place of beginning, where she landed after the Exile and from where her anthos began to encompass

the globe; The Fourth Labyrinth. Earthlings could see it on the face of the Moon as a small triangular mosaic, an astronomical brooch interwoven with hundreds of geometric lines. Astrologers looking through telescopes traced its shapes with detailed precision, arguing among themselves for decades about the solidity of these observations. For the Labyrinth did not have a fixed form, it changed over time; its Form was the principle of regularity, not a specific physical form. This was already the center of Illeia's crown, the axis of its morph, embedded in the keros so firmly and deeply that in a sense the Labyrinth itself was Illeia — just as the terrible geomorphisms of the Urals were in a sense the Warlock.

The Labyrinth stretched twenty stadia along the seashore and fifty stadia inland — an isosceles triangle of bright lights and trembling aether. They entered it from the northwest, between rows of uranoise mills grinding lunar grain from the northern farms. Here they had to slow down, the driver lifted the perpetua mobilia of the carriage, the apoxies themselves pulled the aetheric structure. Mr. Berbelek looked around the alleys and squares of the Labyrinth. Its walls were compact masses of fiery vegetation, natural rock formations, morphs of Earth and Fire; part of the Labyrinth lies beneath the surface of the Moon. Its walls are also large, complex machines suspended on spidery perpetua mobilia, shining in the sky above the Labyrinth in runic constellations — their rotations determine changes in the Labyrinth's configuration. Thus the streets shift, the streams jump from bed to bed, the glades and dynastic groves now emerge into the light, now sink into shadow, whole districts now sink underground, now float above the Labyrinth on spielnik skeletons, spirals of airy houses wrap and unwind around pyr baobabs, palaces of fiery flora turn their backs on the avenues, the avenues themselves change direction.

At this hour, they are full of people and the turmoil of the keros also affected the morphs of the passengers of the carriage surrounded by the crowd. The first Hyppyres leaned towards Mr. Berbelek, clasps his arm with his left hand, and pointed with his right over the flaming manes of the apoxes, towards the center of the Labyrinth.

The noise was too great, Hierokharis spoke loudly directly into Mr. Berbelek's ear.

"Now I will lead you. Do not leave me for a single step, or you will get lost. You will leave all your clothes and all objects worn on and in your body in the carriage. You will empty your bladder and intestines. I will give you a drink

of purinic hydor; if you vomit in front of her, it is better to vomit with clean water. Finally, you will be given a rose thorn. Hold it in your hand; when you feel that you are losing consciousness or cannot think, clench your fist. Blood is permitted.

"What should I...?"

"There is no etiquette, no ritual. The ritual is engraved in the keros. You will behave as you must. Do you think you would be able to offend her in any way?

"I know you would not. We are not human. We have no will of our own. Their Form governs us."

"We enter."

The labyrinth is surrounded by no defensive walls, external or internal, there is no boundary between the city of ordinary Moonies and the gardens, palaces and caves of the Lady. There are no gates, moats, wickets, doors, chains; guards. Anyone may enter. It depends solely on his morph, which path he will choose, what path his mind is able to think. So deep will it reach through districts of regular gardens and residential arbors: to the Three Markets, where new prices for every commodity are set every hour and fortunes in aether, gold and Illeiatic tablets change hands; deeper, to the lunar academies hidden in steamy ember groves; deeper still, to the temple offices, where statistics of the entire lunar economy are continually recorded in the secret languages of forgotten cults; deeper still, to the sacrificial sanctuaries, where, for a symbolic or mortal sacrifice, the Lady or her priest-teknitoi will grant or deny the sacrificer's request; and deepest, to the heart of the Labyrinth, before the face of Illeia the Cruel.

"LADY".

"Stand"

He stood.

Thirteen, fourteen, fifteen, sixteen, seventeen.

“Are you counting?”

“I have to.”

“Come with me”

He went with her.

High in the sky — The Earth was almost half-illuminated, obscured by the openwork everlasting machine, slowly rotating on an inclined axis above the very center of the Labyrinth.

“You’re taller.”

“Yes.”

They walk through shady groves. The trees here are young, low, the dust in their leaves and bark glows deep red. Black snakes, dozens of small bodies, slink across the warm, moist earth. Mr. Berbelek walks, staring at his feet.

”Look into my eyes.”

“Lady...”

“Look into my eyes.”

Mr. Berbelek raised his gaze.

“You won’t spit in my face, will you?”

Mr. Berbelek burst out laughing.

“Good. I couldn’t spend much time with you today anyway. You’ll go to the Other Side, to the Inverted Prison.“

“Madam...”

“You will go, my Hieronim, you will go. Do you know why you came here at all? Why she went to Europe, why she dragged you out of Vodenburg, brought you back to life, took you to Africa? She wrote to me that if any man is capable of doing this, it’s you, who stood up to the Warlock and, looking him in the eye, despite months spent in his anthos, opposed the most powerful kratistos on Earth. Such people with the hardness of a diamond — they are even harder to

find than a diamond.

“It wasn’t like that.“

“Now you oppose me. She chose well. Laugh it up.“

“Forgive me, Lady.”

“Are you asking me to forgive you? Never do that. “

“You are too beautiful.”

“Am I blinding you? Straighten up! Ah. Yes. Hieronim, Hieronim. She wrote to me that you have not gone deeper into the Skoliodoi, you have not seen them. You must know what we are fighting, what you will be fighting. Nothing of words; to know is to experience. Throw out this thorn.”

”I have not seen anything? Who? What?“

“Adynatos, the Impossibles. War will break out sooner or later, the planets change orbits.

“These people... Your daughter promised me the heads of the perpetrators of the Twist.“

“They are not people. Do you think that before my Exile even a drop of Water would have remained on the surface of the Moon, that it would not have fallen from here to the center of the world, to its own sphere, even the lightest cloud of air? There is more than one means and more than one End. Read the old philosophers, Xenophanes, Anaxagoras, Democritus, they were closer to the truth. Light and shadow, wind, leaves in the wind, free moon dust, insects and small animals, in swarms, in herds — this regularity, this pattern, how everything revolves around it, organizes through the reflection of morphia, the order of the surrounding light — even the silver surface of the sacred pool, in which the stars, the aetheric eternal machine and the Earth are reflected. Here: means, End.”

“What are you looking at? Come closer.“

“These snakes...”

“They belong to a Form older than me. What are gods really? A morph of

eternal dreams and nightmares, dreams and fears. I inherited it, fulfilled it, it existed before I came into the world. Just as the morph of the strategos existed before the first strategos fought the first battle. Come closer.“

He comes closer.

A kiss placed on his sweaty forehead took him completely by surprise. He felt nothing.

Until the venom spread in him in a hot wave.

”You —”

“Stop! Now you are mine. Go get some sleep. This is a good fire. When you return, I will tell you about your destiny.“

Twenty eight, twenty nine, thirty.

“Good, very good. Go.”

He went.

[I]

The Other

19 Januarius. *I really want to describe her.*

"Here's the thing" said Ryter Omixos Zarnik, taking a shot at the charging Anaires. "So that you know and so that we know whether you will fucking stand in front of the Kratista's anaires — stand there, rip off its morph and kill it. Stand back."

The roar of the keraunet shook the plain and the bare rocks of the Moon. Flying through ann atmosphere saturated with dust, the glowing bullet burned a straight line of blinding red behind it. The anaires was pierced by the head of a spear half a stadium long "trrrrrachttt!" followed by an explosion of uraninois debris. Zarnik triumphantly shook the heavy keraunet with an aetheric barrel and a stock in the shape of a complexly coiled iron snake (the stock had to fit a Hyppyres's armor). Indeed, Omixos had something to be happy about — a successful hit from this distance didn't happen often.

In the case of anaires, due to their bodies accelerating in a million orbits, it was necessary to hit exactly in the center, on the axis, on the secret line of balance of the animal, which turned out to be even more difficult because the anaires masked its true appearance and direction of movement with clouds of

dark ge on the outer parts. epicycles. These self-generated monsters of the Other Side could reach up to two dozen pous in diameter. Hyppyroi jokingly called them djinn. Mr. Berbelek saw today how such a djinn arising from hiding, from sleep in stillness, mixing with the ground dust. But the very second the it crashed into the apoxies — a sloop of aether and ge shot up, a murderous whirlwind instantly cutting into the skin, muscles and bones, a hundred speeding toothed saws. Triacht! — and the slaughter was over.

Another thing was that the Fire Riders in full armor were not much different from the anaires. Omixos did not have to ask Mr. Berbelek to step aside — since they put on their gear, Hieronim tried to stay at least two steps away from the nearest soldier. They wore them right after crossing the Bridge of Apathy, with the Earth still above their heads and wearing the Lady's crown. On Omixos's order, the three carriages pulled to the side of the road (they had not seen other travelers on the road for a long time), the drivers were given half an hour to take care of the apoxes, and Mr. Berbelek — to stretch his legs; the Hyppyroi, on the other hand, armed themselves. The Inverted Prison lay far on the Other Side, they would have to leave Illeia's Anthos and cross the lands of the anaires, to delve into the wild Moon.

The Fire Riders' armor was made of purine aether. For the most part they remained almost invisible in the green twilight of the moonlit night; in the sunlight they revealed their shape with series of flashes, blinding reflections, and waves of silver gleam. Even then, they seemed more openwork, light as a snowflake, a dreamlike construction, the product of a demiurgos-jeweler rather than a woodcarver, a miracle of jewelry too delicate to be even possible in waking life. However, the impression was misleading.

They were made of aether, which meant eternal movement in circular orbits — and this is what the engravers put on with practiced precision: epicycles of murderous perpetua mobilia. Clutches of cleverly designed everlasting machines surrounded the Hyppyroi's torsos, and the speeding hoops of uranosis descended in serpentine spirals along their arms and thighs. Around the shoulders and pelvis, around the elbows and knees, around the ankles and wrists, around the neck — small and large flywheels of heavy aether rotated, composed in elaborate configurations, on axes that tilted and moved depending on the position and movement of the Ryter. All this had to work in great synchrony so that the aether did not knock itself out of intersecting orbits — and this is how it worked: a masterpiece of war watchmaking.

As the Fire Rider stood still, the armor barely swirled — the breastplate every heartbeat, the breastplate every half, the breastplate every quarter, the breastplate every twelfth (in Pythagorean harmony). After all, when the Hyppyres moved, when he ran, when he struck, when he went into battle — the Eternal machines accelerated, one, two, four, eight, sixteen, one hundred twenty-eight, one thousand twenty-four times. They accelerated and multiplied their epicycles, expanding their orbits as much as possible, that is, to the ground surface or to the Ryter's body itself. The Uranoisis bargewheels suddenly grew to a diameter of ten pous, swelling into whirlpools of black ice, transparent shadow: aether fattened by dirty ge.

The armor reacted to the slightest change in the Hyppyres' morph. All he had to do was pull his arm back to strike — the circular arms and shoulder perpetua mobilia were already gaining momentum and swelling, in a split second the asymmetrical vortex was pulling the Ryter along with it, invisible gears and delicate mechanisms were snapping, and the blow was falling in a fiery streak, raised a thousand times in its power, a discharge of all the momentum given by the armor. Gdrumm! This is how they crushed the stones, crumbled the surface of the spires and tore the anaires to shreds.

There were eight Ryters in Mr. Berbelek's entourage, led by Omixos. Zarnik ordered four of them to run alongside, in front of and behind the carriages; they ran in the tireless rhythm of perpetua mobilia, their pelvic and knee girdles thick and black with the the ge ballast's accumulating momentum. The other four rode in carriages, keraunets in hand, looking out for anaires. This did not save them from an ambush by a sleeping monster. They were already on the Other Side, a hundred stadia from Shadowwatch. The Earth disappeared from the sky, but the edge of the sun's disk still protruded above the horizon, and the rocky surface of the Moon was encrypted in a labyrinth of deep and shallow shadows. There was no road as such anymore, they were rushing along a line of black statues — they cast the longest shadows. Mr. Berbelek was riding in the middle coach. When the first one suddenly turned and fell on its side, the driver of the second one jerked to the right and ran in a wide arc, away from the scene of the accident; the third carriage turned left. Mr. Berbelek stood, holding onto the backrest and the base of an umbrella carved with birds of paradise. He still managed to see the Hyppyroi immediately scattering in a spiral, and the rider from the overturned carriage, falling in a terrible whirlpool of his armor, covered by the red flame of Wrath, into another whirlpool, even larger. Aether clashed with aether. The sound of dry thunder rolled across the plain of pyr, as

if Zeus had fired a rukata. Omixos Zarnik, who was riding in the carriage with Hieronim, shouted at the driver to turn back. They completed a lap. Omixos jumped down from the speeding carriage with a keraunet in his hand.

Putting the uranois vehicle back on its wheels and repairing it must have taken a long time, and the Anaires, attracted by the loud death of their brethren, were already flocking to them from all over the area. The Hyppyroi formed a circle around the three carriages and fired at the charging creatures until they hit or until they hit a dozen pous. — then the Pyr Ryters rushed at them in sudden halos of blinding light fire and smashed into aether dust.

"Here's the thing" explained Omixos Zarnik "That Damien refused, yes, he knew he was too weak, but the previous one, the first one, what was his name, Mikael, his Lady accepted him the same way and sent him to the Prison."

"Well?"

Hegemon of the *Urkaj* was calmly loading the keraunet. The armor was spinning again with numbing slowness, and with his naked eye Mr. Berbelek could make out the shapes of the aetheric makina twisting in sloping orbits around Omixos's glowing body: lacy spirals, thin-legged spiders, their vibrating spider webs, flickering butterflies, ribbons without end and beginning, clusters of crystal balls, icicles of razor-sharp uranoise, uranoise forged into dragons, swans, snakes, scorpions, manticores, eagles, dragonflies, swords and axes, the size of your thumb and more smaller, filigree statuettes of legendary engravers of antiquity.

"He stayed there. The Adynatos attracted him, transformed him, absorbed him into its crown. Yet it was not a Kratistos, just some inattentive scout, at most a teknites. Moreover, whether among the Adynatos it is possible to distinguish between demiurgos and teknites, or indeed whether it is possible to distinguish anyone and anything at all, the Lady's sophistae are still arguing. Be careful."

Thunder. Omixos felled the next one. He began loading the Keraunet again. Its five-pous barrel was made of aether, which meant constant rotation around the firing axis — Hyppyroi claimed that this made their bullets hit more accurately and the red lines of dust in the air were much straighter.

"We should have taken the dogs" Zarnik muttered. He looked back at the

drivers and people working on the damaged coach. “How much longer?!”

“Now!” they shouted back. “Just get the horses across!”

“So what are you waiting for, it will kill you!

Mr. Berbelek saw the dogs that Omixos had in mind. Before leaving the Labyrinth, when the Lady’s bureaucrat took Hieronim to the Hyppyroi embergrove to assign him an escort to the Inverted Prison (they did not yet know that *Urkaj* had returned from Erzu and Omixos finished his star service), Mr. Berbelek saw several pairs of pyrogars running in the red twilight between the trunks of fire oaks and jasioniks. The pyrogars’ eyes glowed like drops of pig iron, but their gray fur baked with hot ash allowed them to blend reliably into any shadow. One pair stopped, bared their fangs (a blue flame burst from between them), and growled at Hieronim. Hieronim hissed through his teeth. They stepped back. Dogs, dogs, I had dogs, I bred them, I hunted in the Vistulan forests with packs of the noblest hounds, I liked dogs... Dogs! Nadiya! A grave in the forest and the dull noise of Świątowid’s greenery — it all comes back again — Nadiya and her voice, face, smell, words — and I almost forgot — dogs, dogs. Mr. Berbelek escaped from this grove.

“Well, you think, Esthlos, the veterans agree on one thing: Adynatos cannot be described. We have discussed this for a long time, but don’t think that it doesn’t still bother me, because it does; the sophistae gave us instructions when we were going on this reconnaissance beyond the sphere of Mars, so that we wouldn’t kill ourselves due to ignorance, we didn’t have it there in the Prison yet and no one knew what it was all about. Anyway, it’s still unknown, but — come on, come on, let’s go, jump in, Esthlos! — but there is so much that can be said about them that cannot be told. Apparently, Esthlos, you have entered one of their footholds on Earth. How deep?“

“A dozen or so stadia. But in fact, only a tiny fraction of the way to the very center. But everything falls apart there, complete chaos of Form, and if it continues like this to the center... there is nothing to describe there.”

“Isn’t that why we call them arretes? Omixos laughed. “They do not come from the earthly spheres, they are neither conceivable nor describable under a human morph.”

“But how do we really know that what they are, that they wish us ill? Were

there any open acts of war on their part?

“How do you distinguish war from peace here? Will you send a herald in an embassy of reconciliation to ask about the terms and negotiate the price of passage? Outside the Arretes morph it will remain a human being and you can then ask it and demand an answer; but when it enters the anthos of the Adynatos, and all the more so when it gets close enough to them to actually communicate with them — to whom will you speak? Who will it return to? It will not return. You cannot have a human and an Adynatos morph at the same time. If you understand them, if you are able to tell who they are, how they think, why they came, what they want and whether this is war or not, whether they even know the concept of war — if you understood anything, I would have to kill you immediately.”

“You are exaggerating.”

“I would have to kill you immediately. Anyone else, who could similarly infect us with their Form. Don’t you know, strategos? How can we tell when the boundaries of the auras of the kratistos have shifted? That you gradually begin to better understand the reasons, customs and ideals of the victor, that his power and he himself seems more — more natural to you. Why did the Lady have to flee Earth, why did they unite against her? She was the Mother of all people.”

”Maybe indirectly then. How do you do it with savages. You breed hybrids, to bridge the morphs they’re stretched between.”

“What do you want to do? Do you really want this, Esthlos?”

Mr. Berbelek did not answer, because he had just remembered the fate of the robber Hamis. They did not know this when they sent Hamis deep into The Skoliodoi (Hieronim did not know — Shulima knew perfectly well), but that was their herald, their Parrot for conversations with the Adynatos. He had gone to the Arretes Form, and returned, and told — what did they understand?

There was still too much of the anthromorph in Hamis for him to truly understand what he had seen; and there was already too much of the Arretes morph in him for him to be able to express what he had been able to understand.

”War is war, after all,” muttered Mr. Berbelek.

"They did not land in Rome, in the middle of Europe, on the Market of the World in Alexandria, they did not even land on our Moon. They choose the most desolate lands."

"So what does that mean? That they don't want to harm us, or that they're preparing for a secret attack?" The Ryter snorted. "By Sheol, Mr. Hieronem, their very presence here is war!"

How do the kratistoi meet and negotiate?They don't meet.

If the Warlock suddenly decides to visit his neighbor Świątowid, then — whatever his goals may be, even if he goes alone, without an army and sends dozens of heralds of peace before him — then this is war, a clash of Form with Form.

Between stranger and stranger — there can only be violence.

Agreement — can only happen between beings of the same Form.

Agreement — that is, the victory of the Form of the stronger, which, having accepted, the weaker will now understand clearly and distinctly why he was wrong.

"Where exactly did they come from?"

Omixos couldn't clap his hand against his thigh in his armor, so he just snorted black smoke.

"Beyond the sphere of fixed stars. Is there even a "where" and "where from" beyond it?This is an empty game of the sophistes.

"But why, why did they come here?"

"Oh, come on, Esthlos, maybe you'll ask him yourself, huh? He'll surely explain it to you in simple words, and then you'll tell us again."

Mr. Berbelek raised an eyebrow.

"Forgive me," the Ryter muttered.

The aetheric carriages sped along in a shimmering caravan along the line of shadows of black statues. Previously, each carriage was preceded by four

apoxes, now the remaining eight horses were divided as follows: two, three, three. The statues represented various historical and legendary figures from the past and mythology of the Moon. (In addition to the Alley of Heroes, the Other Side was also crossed by the Alley of the Gods, leading to the mausoleum of Hierokris the Beautiful, and the Alley of Daimons). However, the statues flashed past Mr. Berbelek too quickly for him to take a good look at them and distinguish the carved figures. Besides, the silver glow of the uranoise machines slightly blinded Hieronim, and the whole swaying panorama of the dark Moon — especially since they had finally left the zone of sunlight — merged into one rough shadow: crater, spielnik, crater, black desert, crater, pyr, crater. This was already a land of such density of dust, or rather such its predominance over air, that if it were not for the alkimic perpetua mobilia of carriages, tirelessly grinding the fiery atmosphere and fanning the purinous Air into the faces of the passengers, they would have long since been lying on the trusses of carriages, curled up in martyr's poses, suffocated, with burnt throats and lungs, with blood on their lips and nostrils. Maybe not Hyppyroi, but Mr. Berbelek for sure. The condensation of the arche of Fire caused spontaneous downpours of flames, falling along the lines of the orbits of the supralunar uranoisis. The astrometry of these invisible epicycles burned flat, glassy dust fields on the surface of the Moon, and also set off gigantic lightning bolts of pyrownik. Every few and several dozen thousand years, when the astrological mechanics of the sky leads to collisions, decouplings and superimpositions of the epicycles of uranoise, the dust brought by its revolutions spontaneously ignites in truly powerful explosions — hence the abundance of craters on the surface of the Moon and planets, sometimes as large as the one on whose bottom they were just traveling, hour after hour; what a fire it must have been...! Astrologers, wealthy enthusiasts like Antidektes, constantly observe the sky, diligently noting subsequent flashes between the stars. From their Pythagorean harmony one can deduce the principles of the construction of the Cosmic Clock, and some claim that one can also — predict the future revolutions of the Earth's Clock, and even — see the Goal, that is, God.

Of course, now, after the invasion of the Adynatos' aura into the earthly spheres, the clock broke down, the mathematics of the heavens stopped resonating sounds pleasant to the human ear.

Mr. Berbelek, having moved on the rocking carriage seat under the aetheric lamp, rotating under the asymmetrical umbrella, opened his journal and began to write. He wrote slowly, thoughtfully, lifting the stylus when they hit a series

of larger unevennesses of the ground:

The oldest philosophers, the pre-Aristotelian sages, whom he mentioned: Xenophanes, Anaxagoras, Demokritus. Before leaving, I checked in the library of the Labyrinth Academy. It is true, they knew. Xenophanes claimed that there are an infinite number of worlds; similarly Demokritus: an infinity of worlds, born and perishing, from an infinity of atoms, moving and creating Earth, Water, Air, Fire. Anaxagoras proclaimed truths which in fact turned out to be prophecies: that the Moon is inhabited, with its mountains, valleys, deserts and caves. But also the truths of Zofia: that the first animals were born from moisture, warmth and Earth.

All this was said and written down long ago, it was already obvious once; so why am I surprised? However, the hardest thing is to accept the humiliating obviousness, to break one's own pride. If Illeia was able to impose her morph on the Moon, to oppose it to the Earth - the center of the universe, that now there are two centers, two hierarchies of the spheres of Matter and we can travel on the surface of the Moon attracted to its interior, and not to the sphere of the Earth's ge... why only two centers, why not three, four, five? Let us banish the next kratistos to Venus! The next one to Jupiter! Why then could there not be other Centers, other Ends and other Teleologies beyond the celestial spheres of the Earth? In the infinity of worlds, born and perishing. They exist.

We have been humiliated. One of many different perfections — what is such perfection worth, what is such a God worth? The soul may give us self-awareness, but the will to live comes from somewhere else: from the hot thymos, the feeling of pride in the Form, present or yet imagined, to which we strive. That we will not bow our necks; that we will rise from the mud for the thousandth time; that we know that of the two perfections ours is always the better. I feel this fire growing within me. She did not have to poison me with her venom and I do not need dust in my blood. I have seduced myself. I know where I am striving, what kind of self I choose, what attracts me and where my perfection lies, the necessary complete form from which I cannot, do not want, will not turn away. Kratisticide! I was born for this, this is my entelechia. I already live in the pride of this morph. This is not pride. I know my place. Kratisticide! I will do it.

THE Inverted Prison was located at the bottom of a crater more than seven stadia in diameter. The Aetheric Torment spun continuously above the caldera slopes, cutting off the Prison and the Adynatos within it from the rest of the Moon. A watchtower rose on the northern ridge of the crater; from it, above the speeding Torment, an iron platform was lowered on multi-pulley machines, along which sophistae, convicts and candidates for kratisticides descended into the Arretesian aura. For two years, Aker the Numismatist, an old sophistes of the Labyrinth, one of many admitted by the Lady to the secret, had lived in the tower. Of course, he was not on guard; the guards were the five Fire Riders.

That day Aker woke up with a cold shiver, his head already splitting from the prolonged, bass sound that made all the glass and metal in the tower tremble. The groans of the Adynatos carried across the Moon in a slow wave, penetrating all matter and pressing on minds. Aker rose and, cursing, went to the window. Sometimes you could see that sound, it created ripples in the thick dust, along which the shaken arches of Fire burned. This time, however, the sophistes saw only one distant shower of flames; the sky above the prison crater was clear.

Another light caught the Numismatist's eye. To the left, over the slope, on the Heroes' Road, a patch of silver light moved. He squinted; as usual, he had forgotten his opticum somewhere. He rang the bell — in any case, some guests are coming to the Prison.

Aker the Numismatist had, in his old age, broken out of the lunar cycle of sleep and wakefulness and — as often happened with the aged Moon Folk — returned to the most primitive morph, night and day counted in hours; and the more he advanced in years, the fewer hours were contained in that cycle. Having gone down to the ground floor of the tower, he found only one Hyppyres, the Ryter Chiratia, on her feet; the others were still sleeping. Chiracia was just putting on her armor; she already knew about the guests. Aker gave orders to the few servants to prepare lodgings and cold meals for the visitors. They were usually sophistae or hegemons, coming to get acquainted with the enemy. They were leaving before Aker had time to doze off and wake up twice. Sometimes, however, they were mistaken for him in his waking state.

He went out onto the terrace under the bridge girders. The chains of the machine clanged from the deep, monotonous groan of the Adynatos.

It was first seen on the Lower Side, already within the boundaries of the Lady's crown — but it was not any more human for that. On the basis of

preliminary reports — when people did not yet know in truth what they were reporting — his route was mapped out. The extension of this line drawn on the map pointed straight to the Fourth Labyrinth. This happened right after the first major skirmish with the Adynatos, later christened the Battle of Mars, although Mars was then on the opposite side of its sphere, on a low epicycle. No wonder the whole event was interpreted as a reconnaissance before a general attack by the Adynatos on Abazon. Hierokharis pushed a considerable force against the Warp scout, an entire enneon, which is nine triplets of Hyppyroi. However, the Lady, for some reason — known only to the Lady — forbade direct attacks on The Adynatos. In great haste, astromekans, aether blacksmiths, teknitoi of the art of star sculpture were brought in. After a week of struggle, The Adynatos was locked in the Uranois Torment and dragged laboriously to the Other Side, to the Inverted Prison.

From every living creature, however stupid and primitive, one should expect human reactions at least to pain and mutilation; no one willingly repeats suicidal acts. There was not even that much man in Adynatos.

The Torment was woven from purinic aether, congealed into a cloud of a million tiny blades, a cyclical storm of white needles, splinters and knives. The Adynatos constantly attacked it, as if trying to Twist the pure aether. The Torment cut it, tore it, tore it. Then it would retreat, broken into long ribbons of chaos, to gather later — like a spring storm, just as inexorably and at a steadily growing pace, to the sounds of that cacophony that irritates the ears — until the moment of the next attack came; and so endlessly: Chaos in Torment.

Sipping the icy qahwa, the sophistes estimated the current shapes of shadows, the inclination of the rocks and the position of the clouds of yellow smoke. Sometimes the movements of the Adynatos could only be detected by comparing the readings of the clocks placed around the crater and by analyzing the subtle changes in the inclination of the Torment's orbit. Sometimes they were not detectable at all. It was a source of perverse satisfaction to Aker that he had managed to predict the behavior of the Adynatos several times against the indications of the statistical observation tables. Each time, the other sophistae and Hyppyroi looked at the Numismatist with greater suspicion. He chuckled to himself, catching their furtive glances — who will notice the first cacomorphy in the grumpy old man? He would not be surprised if they took bets among themselves. Old people are most susceptible to external deformations — weak Form, weak body, even the best teknitoi soma will not help here, everything falls

apart, rots, degenerates: muscles, teeth, hair, memory, personality. The numismatist looked at the Prison over the edge of the cold goblet. It may not be the best end, but at least it would be an unusual end for old age. In the Labyrinth‘s library, he read about savages on Earth who take helpless old people to the wastelands, where they leave them to be eaten by bird and dog scavengers. If the old people don’t go there of their own free will first.

He returned to the tower before his throat began to burn. The guests had already entered. He found Chiratia half-bowing to a tall Earthman in a white robe, a dark-haired aristocrat with a predatory gaze, who was currently sticking a tube with some white substance to his nose. The Earthman didn’t even pay any attention to Chiratia. The Fire Riders accompanying him were dispersing around the tower, always looking back at him in the doorway; he wasn’t paying any attention either. Only one remained, in the fast okolhelm of a hegemon.

He nodded to Aker.

Having returned the cup to the doulos, the sophistes approached him, shuffling his feet exaggeratedly.

”Esthlos Hieronim Berbelek, by the Lady’s request,” said the Hyppyres. He didn’t indicate the Earthman in any way, but the Form was obvious.

”The second?” Aker asked, giving Berbelek an appraising look.

The Earthman caught it and smiled crookedly.

”Perhaps we should settle this first, and we’ll exchange pleasantries when I return. This way?”

The Numismatist sucked in air through his teeth.

”This isn’t a good time. It seems rather restless today...”

Berbelek waited out the sophistes’s silence.

”Can’t you hear?” Aker added after a moment, when a prolonged groan flowed through the interior of the tower again. The armor of the hegemon and Chiratia sang in resonance.

”This is a good time,” said Berbelek.

He surprised the Numismatist by leaning over him and gently squeezing his shoulder.

"Don't be afraid," he whispered in his ear. "I won't do anything to it."

He stepped out onto the terrace.

The Hyppyroi followed him, the hegemon first. Aker hesitated in mid-step, turned into a side corridor, opened a metal shelf, and took out an aetheric aeromat. With the vibrating machine under his arm, he shuffled out the side exit into the shadow of the raised platform.

They stood by the stairs. At the Earthman's nod, Chiracia hurried to start the heavy multi-pulley mechanism, to lower the perpetua mobilia onto the internal modes. Berbelek and the hegemon looked in silence over the charred battlements into the interior of the Prison, into the silver circle of The Torment. Berbelek was beginning to cough.

Aker handed him the aeromat. The Earthman turned it over in his hands a few times. The Numismatist was already opening his mouth when Berbelek quickly pulled the hood over his head and tightened the straps. Uranois eddies began to blow hot Aeru straight into his face.

The platform rattled and creaked as it was lowered. Berbelek wrapped his long, flowing robe more tightly and climbed the eight steps between the thick chains. The platform was already approaching the level. Aker remembered the external air vents of the tower and withdrew for a moment to the hallway to open the air vents to the terrace. When he returned, the platform was completely lowered (the rattling and grinding had stopped), and Berbelek was marching at a fast pace up the steep ramp into the depths of the crater. He passed over the slightly rustling Torment, passed over the First Clock and jumped onto the cinder mound on the crater's slope; the white flaps unfurled behind him, he landed in a kneeling position, long streaks of black remained on the material. He did not look back, he ran quickly down the slope. The Hyppyres started the heavy machines again, the platform began to rise.

They stood by the battlements, Aker, the hegemon, and Chiratia, staring at one point. The white figure reached the bottom of the caldera and turned toward the dark cloud of dust and smoke, swirling southwest from the center of the basin.

"Where does this dust storm come from?" asked the hegemon. "I'd like to finally see it."

"But you see, you see," the Numismatist cackled.

"I see only a ball of garbage in the wind."

"Because the Arretes aura doesn't cover us. Look at the Esthlos."

The Earthman was only a few dozen pous from the edge of the dust. One would expect the wind to first ruffle his robe, but something else began to happen to it: it lost its uniform color, the streaks of black spread into spots of all shades of gray, then it lost its shape, sleeves, skirts, the hood thrown back, with each successive step Berbelek took, it overlapped, mixed, tore, a whirl of colorful rags, finally it even lost the texture of the fabric and the Earthman walked dressed in the same cloud of dust-not-dust, a veil of multicolored smoke, as the one he was heading for, and in fact he was already on its border, already touching it, hand, head, heel — he entered, disappeared.

The hegemon sighed loudly.

"After him."

Aker tilted his head.

"The shadows were shaping up nicely around him, let's wait."

The hegemon snorted red sparks.

"Do you believe in such things? Maybe you also divine from the reflection of its anthos in water and wind? Sophistes!"

The numismatist put his arthritic finger to his lips.

"Plutarch tells how the philosopher Anaxagoras tried to disabuse his friend, the hegemon Pericles, of his belief in superstition. So a ram born with only one horn was brought to Pericles. The clairvoyant Lampon, present in the camp, quickly read this miraculous sign and predicted victory and supreme power for Pericles. Anaxagoras, irritated, ordered the skull of the one-horned ram to be split open. Then he explained to all gathered how such an anomaly had arisen from natural, anatomical causes. He was right, of course, and they agreed on his explanation, and the clairvoyant Lampon departed in disgrace."

Aker spoke very slowly, drawing out his words hoarsely and every now and then spitting over the battlements, which only increased the impatience of the fiery Ryter, the aether of his armor leaping to slightly higher epicycles.

"And?"

"And soon after that Pericles became supreme ruler," said the Numismatist.

"I never know when you're making things up," muttered Chiratia.

A new groan rose from the bottom of the caldera, the Hyppyres' armors responded with their music.

The hegemon made an intoxicated gesture.

"Does he howl like that all the time?"

"Hmmm. I don't think his voice is what that is."

"What?"

"Of course, other sophistae disagree with me. But I think that sound does not belong to his morph at all. Just as gender does not belong to it — so we really have no right to say 'he' or 'she' — speech does not belong, hands, head, blood, skin, certainly body in general, corporeality, which is a feature of the earthly morph. I am also not certain whether death is included in the Adynatos morph. So of course life, yes. I do not know whether one can say in their aura that someone is alive or dead. They certainly do not need any food and do not excrete anything. I also do not know whether it is possible to speak at all of unity and multiplicity: that there is one or that there are many. Neither this nor that. Time, space — that there is here and There, that there is then and now — which also the categories of man, of earthly spheres. The longer I examine it, the deeper I retreat into uncertainty. This is how one must get rid of the obviousness of human Form, if one wants to reach the truth. For example, the five elements — Earth, Water, Air, Fire, Aether — they constitute the basis of Matter in earthly spheres, but beyond the sphere of fixed stars, the world may be composed of something entirely different. We sent some of these convicts down here precisely so that they could try to bring us a sample of the original Matter of the Adynatos."

"Did they bring it?"

“Perhaps we would learn the most from observing transitional states, that front of the clash of Forms, which must dissolve keros to the very bones, there, on Earth, on the border of their bridgeheads, where the earthly Substances turn toward the Arretes Forms, not the other way around. When the senses perceive something more than complete chaos.”

“When we approached their fleet behind Mars.”

”Fleets, you say. You surely remember well that you saw a fleet.“

“Well...”

The Numismatist pointed to the bottom of the crater.

“Tell me what you see.”

“The Adynatos.”

“No. Tell me what you see.“

“A cloud of dust.”

“What is dust? What is a cloud? Tell me what you see.”

“Something that looks like a cloud of dust.”

“You think: a cloud of dust is similar. But first, step back from your thought — tell me what you see.“

“I don’t know!”

“How can you know nothing about what you see? Are you blind?“

“I can’t name it!”

“Why?”

“I know what you mean. I’ve never seen it before, so I can only compare. What comes to mind is a cloud of dust.”

“But you can name it.”

”What do you call something you’ve never seen before and can’t describe?”

“An Arretes. If I can’t describe it...”

“Have you ever seen a whole stone? How do you know that it is a stone?”

“It has the form of a stone.”

“Ah! What?“

“I see. It has no form.“

“What was before Form?”

“Chaos.”

“So what is the only name for everything that is truly alien?”

“Chaos.”

“What do you see?”

“Chaos.”

“What do you see?”

“Chaos.”

“What do you see?”

“Chaos.”

“What do you see”

“Chaos, chaos.”

The bass groan fell silent for a moment, then rose again. A doulos brought cakes with pastries, fruit, and wine to the terrace. The Hegemon took off his helmet and placed it on the battlements, between the chalice and the jug.

“I do not understand how a completely amorphous Substance can exist.”

“He can’t. He has a Form, his Form. We simply are not able to recognize it. Look at the sky. If your parents hadn’t told you, would you know that these few stars are Orion?”

The Hegemon drank and poured himself some more wine.

“Hmm. If we are not able to see their Form... How do we know if they see ours at all?”

“We don’t know. But—“ The Numismatist raised his finger again, smiled maliciously “They came to us.”

The black groan fell another half harmony. The bowls, jugs and goblets rang.

“Yet” Chiratia muttered. “I can hear longing, suffering, anger, sadness in his voice.”

“This is not his voice. You think so.“

“Claudius hears it too” she insisted. “Next time he brings a lyre, then you can play it, there is a melody in it, he will play it, then you will see.“

“Thucydides the Third, Gothic Wars. That night Zamos and Iloxas, nicknamed Euexis, decided to attack the Goths’ camp by surprise. Having taken off their heavy armor and painted their faces with mud, they sneaked with their men through the marshes. No one noticed them. They could already see the enemy’s campfires and hear their voices. They also heard the songs that the barbarians sang at night so as not to succumb to sleep. Zamos and Iloxas, of course, did not understand these wild ballads, but their hearts trembled in the cold night and the warriors wept silently in the darkness. At dawn, when Zamos gave the signal, they rushed at the surprised Goths. The chronicles do not mention that any of the barbarians survived.“

”There he is!”

She rushed to the machine, lowering the long platform with a grinding and roaring sound.

He walked back more slowly. He was naked, his ribs were clearly visible under his taut skin. He stopped, bent in half, spat and coughed. There was no trace of the aeromat. His hair was tousled and there was blood on his hands. In his left hand he clutched a dagger with a blade like a flame. Having jumped down the stairs onto the terrace, he stood for a long time and panted loudly, drawing warm air into his lungs. As he did so, he looked wildly from the hegemon to

Chiratia, to Aker and back. His fingers were clenched around the hilt of his dagger so tightly that his whole hand was shaking.

The sophistes examined Berbelek's body closely. A discoloration of the pigment on his left thigh, an additional bone above his right collarbone, and a small flame quivering on his forehead — but that was all.

The Hegemon stepped toward the Earthling, sparks of excitement hissing under the aetheric armor.

"Have you seen him, Esthlos?" he pressed. "What does he look like? Say something! Did he even notice you? Esthlos!"

Berbelek waved his hands, including the one with the dagger. Everyone took a step back. But not before he had managed to catch the back of his hand on Chiratia's shoulder-piece, and blood gushed from his torn hand. Berbelek seemed not to feel it at all. He stared at the hegemon, frowned, blinked. He opened his mouth, but no sound came out.

Aker The Numismatist approached him slowly, placed his arthritic hand on the taller man's shoulder.

"Easy," he whispered.

"Slowly. Everything will come back. You will remember. The words are in you, the memory is in you, the Esthlos Hieronim Berbelek is in you, he will come back. You will come back."

Esthlos Berbelek jerked with anger. A shiver took over his entire body, the shaking reached its peak resonance. Berbelek moved his lips a few more times and screamed:

"One hundred ninety-four! One hundred ninety-five! One hundred ninety-six! Why are you standing there? Someone patch me up, for Sheol's sake! Do you have a demiurgos soma here? Or at least a medic? Omixos, my quarters, I'm about to faint. Pour me that wine. When does the Witch return to the Labyrinth, the day after tomorrow? What's the deal with these clocks? You, old man, what's your name?"

"Aker the Numismatist, sir, sophistes of the Labyrinth, at your service."

“Now it’s time for pleasantries. Esthlos Hieronim Berbelek, Strategos of the Moon. I have to throw up, I think I swallowed something, I can feel it moving in my stomach. Give me more wine. Aker, tell me everything you’ve learned about him, everything you’ve guessed. Now step aside. Gods, what is this shit.”

”Lady.”

”Get Up.”

He got up.

Earth, a green lantern, hangs just above the Labyrinth, above the fire fence and under the spiral everlasting machine, directly opposite Mr. Berbelek; he got up, raised his head, raised his gaze and now blinks, half-blind. This irritates him, he twists into an angry grimace, struggles in the stream of light, like an insect pinned to the dull semidarkness.

”Calm down. Show yourself to me. Yes. I see there is not even a trace left. You are exactly what we were looking for, Hieronim.“

“You know my price.”

“Don’t be afraid.”

Mr. Berbelek laughs mockingly.

“Let’s sit down. I have always liked ponds, I made them after streams. That which is still is more itself than that which is in motion. Do you want to cool off? This is purinic hydor, drink.“

“I’ve already had it.”

“You resist, that’s good. You know that was the first thing that caught her attention.”

“Shulima?”

“Yes. The legend of the strategos who broke the morph of the mightiest kratistos of the Earth. Because if someone like that can’t stand under the

Arretes Form, if not he who will strike the Kratistos of the Adynatos — then who?

"You. Another kratistos."

"Ah."

"But your lives are too precious, aren't they?"

"Me. Of course, yes, I will fight. But you know what my fight will be: Form against Form. In this, no one can replace me. Someone must come near and destroy Matter."

"We do not know whether they die at all."

"But they certainly exist when they exist, and do not exist when they do not exist."

"We do not know whether they have only one kratistos here."

"We can be certain of that too. My astrologers observe the movements of the planets. For the Arretes anthos also distorts the Form of the aether, and the epicycles of the celestial bodies change. The astrologers track the movement of their fleet through the constellation in this way. There is only one source of disturbance in the celestial harmony."

"There may be two or three of them there."

"Two Kratistos in the same place? By definition, they would not be Kratistos. In any case, you will have to kill the Most Powerful."

"Maybe the second one landed on Earth."

"That was the first question I sent Lakatoia there with. Check the range, strength and anchorage in the keros of the Arretes' bridgeheads on Earth. They probably landed there in considerable force, I do not rule out demiurgoi and teknitoi, but there is no Kratistos with them. They are simply — they are simply settling in."

"Of course."

Small pyrfish with brightly shimmering scales live in this pool. Mr. Berbelek

observes their coordinated movements, the dance of a small school. The shape of the wave of underwater fires and its speed correspond to the Lady's statements. When she falls silent for a long moment, the pyrybki stop in their aimless drift and the school breaks up into dozens of separate streams of heat.

"When do we attack?"

"When I am certain of victory."

"Is he stronger?"

"It is possible. But the problem is that no matter how we maneuver, how many Hyppyroi I would not send out and no matter how great a strategos would lead us — in space, in the sky, I will not surround the Adynatos alone, so that they cannot somehow escape from under my morph. They must be closed on at least four sides.

"If I..."

"If they escape from the human anthos, you will not be able to do anything. Perhaps your only chance is a blow dealt under the Form of life and death, fragile body and precious blood."

"So what?"

"That was Shulima's second goal: to delicately test the readiness of other kratistos to participate in the offensive against the Adynatos. You realize how difficult and risky this mission is. They will take Shulima seriously only if they know who she comes from, who she is; and if they find out, they will kill her before she can say anything."

"I conclude that she has not achieved any great successes."

"You must understand the nature of the situation. It is a Gordian knot that no Alexander will unravel. A kratistos who leaves the Earth will have to fight there anew upon his return for every pous of keros, seized in the crowns of his neighbors immediately after his crown was withdrawn. The kings and nations of his lands will fall victim to neighboring rulers and civilizations. There is no point even thinking about any pacts, oaths, or truces here — such is the natural order of things. Look how water flows down and fills empty depressions; thus strength fills every lack of strength, that is, weakness. No kratistos will willingly

go into Exile because the stars have just changed their paths in the sky a little.“

“But if she told them what the situation really is... Did she tell any of them?“

“I have forbidden her to reveal her identity yet. What is the situation really like, my Hieronim?

”The human form may be destroyed. There will be no more people, only one great cacomorphy.”

“They should care about that?”

“Don’t laugh! You cared.

“You will pay me for that scream with blood. Oh. For whom did I care? They invaded my crown. I defended myself. So yes, I did care.”

Blood spreads in the crystal clear hydor in a heavy, fleshy cloud of red, as if some living organism were eating the insides of Water from the inside. The red tentacles of the monster chase the fire-fish, and since the Lady is silent, the red catches up and devours some of them.

“First, you have the Storm King.” says Mr. Berbelek, catching his breath.

“That’s one.”

“Maybe Urwald of the Gaudat Lands.”

“Maybe.”

“Shulima certainly made some contacts. I know she spoke with the Warlock.”

“You still don’t think like a strategos. Let’s say that by some miracle I gather a few of these kratistos and together we crush the Adynatoses into the keros. What will the other kratistos see?”

“The Moon Witch at the head of a powerful alliance. Yes, you’re right, the Seventh War of the Kratistoi.“

“As I told you: a Gordian knot.”

“So what are we waiting for?”

“For an opportunity. For a unique moment, a surprising coincidence. When you live thousands of years, you start to expect the unexpected; eventually every opportunity will come to you of its own accord and calmly lay its head on your lap. You have to wait patiently“

“You’re talking about decades.”

“Yes.”

“Maybe centuries”

“Yes.”

“I think I know what the third goal of the Shulima is: to search further, to search for my successors.“

“Hieronim, Hieronim.”

“You are so terribly patient, you prepare weapons, not knowing whether you will use them at all, this one or only the fifth, tenth, hundredth, just to have some at hand when the chance comes; and in the meantime sharpen and clean them so that they do not rust. What if I do not want to wait? Are you going to imprison me here? What? You would lie and I would believe you. You can have a strategos and you can have an obedient dog, but not both in one Form. So what do you count on? Oh, she is your child without a doubt, Cruel Mother, a weaker but faithful reflection. I know you. I have met you.”

Her skin is surprisingly cool to the touch; it is the normal temperature of a human body, but on the Moon it surprises like scalding ice.

“Tilt your head. Look up, doesn’t longing grip your heart at the sight? Oh, but you knew you’d have to pay for every moment of pride.”

A furious blood octopus attacks the pyrfish, a red monster stirs the pool, the water is no longer pure, the blood of the strategos takes on a divine shape in the swirl of the anthos — but whose anthos is it, for whom does it prophesize, for what purpose is the sacrifice...?

“Now go, go, lose yourself in the Labyrinth.”

He went.

SINCE ritual is the most powerful form, the courtyard was shaped like a triangle. The beasts came out from the north, the dancers waited by the southern wall. Their bodies, rubbed with hot oils, gleamed in the glow of the everlasting machine that powered this part of the Labyrinth. Mr. Berbelek stopped for a moment on the second terrace, under the red aerroses of the garden that were just flowing over the courtyard. The audience whistled and clapped as the dancers jumped over the monsters and reorganized into new formations before the beasts could get going again. Music played. Mr. Berbelek scratched nervously at the scar on his neck; the touch of the kirouffa, although made of the lightest earthly silk and not fastened at all, irritated his heated skin. A seller of rags moved out of the way, barely catching his eye. Mr. Berbelek walked in a cloud of cold anger; stray dogs, which he had not yet thought of kicking away, ran away, whining as if kicked.

On the third terrace, dances of a different kind were taking place, although to the same music. Here too he stopped for a moment, he did not know these steps, did not know this rhythm. Moon customs had preserved something of that natural wildness and cruelty that preceded the time of civilization and the kratistos, and whose trace can never be completely erased from the Form of man. In the shade, under the trees, vendors poured burning wine into aetheric cups and goblets. Here, on the soft grass and warm earth, people danced barefoot to the tune of flutes, drums and kithars. Some kind of celebration, a wedding, a birthday, a prayer to the Lady, a fertility festival? He could not recognize it, he was a stranger here. A fair-haired Moon woman in an indecently short skirt, revealing half her calves, danced up to Mr. Berbelek, curtsied slightly to him, smiling knowingly, and pulled him between the dancers. It was so unexpected and so contrary to his current morphology that in a mindless reflex he raised his hand to strike; he restrained himself with an effort. The woman showed him the steps, led him to the music, to some extent even imposed her Form, that he even responded to her smile with a dry smile. They passed other dancers. She watched him with exciting impudence —wide open, unblinking eyes and a mysterious smile. After a moment he stopped counting the steps and measuring the rhythm in his head. An aetherial piercing swirled around her left nipple, making a prolonged swishing sound when it touched the white silk of the kirouffa, setting off waves of invisible sparks in the material, further irritating Mr. Berbelek's skin.

Then they went under the ash trees, he drank the fiery wine. In the slowly turning goblet of the chalice, liquid and fire mingled, not entirely distinguishable, nor was Hieronim entirely sure what was flowing down his throat. He did not sweat. Suddenly, however, shivers ran down his spine. The fair-haired Moon Girl clung to his side, kissed him on the cheek, before he had time to turn his head, raised his hand to her lips and bit his wrist, immediately sucking on the wound. He knocked the woman to the ground, doused her with fire wine. She smiled, licking her lips.

"She marked you, she got into your blood, I always recognize you, you will die for her!"

He kicked her, spat and left without looking back.

She shouted something after him, but he did not understand the words, distorted by the lunar accent.

There were few people on the fourth terrace, here the labyrinth of residential gazebos began. The music remained behind Mr. Berbelek, he shook himself out of its form. He began to whisper a curse in Vistul. He fell silent only after pressing his torn wrist to his lips — his intention was different, but he drank hot blood just the same, the salty, iron goo stuck to his tongue. Now it was too late, he would not suck out Illeia's venom. He walked, looking at the sky, orienting in his head the tangled constellations of the everlasting machines in relation to the Earth and trying to calculate where the Abazonian Spiral was currently located, a district of the Fourth Labyrinth, where Omixos Zarnik had his grove — because that was where Mr. Berbelek had stopped for the duration of his visit to Illeia Potnii. So perhaps for the rest of his life. Trapped! The Strategos of the Moon, ha! He spat blood.

The dances of the sky-high perpetua mobilia finally made him dizzy, he sat down in the first of the open arbors. In their walls, overgrown with pyr bindweed, openings were left for stone blocks with chessboards carved on the flat top; the pieces were waiting, set in their positions. It was the Chess Players' Labyrinth. As soon as Mr. Berbelek sat down, a thin child's hand appeared in the opening above the stone table. Hieronim hesitated, but reached into his pocket and threw the boy (or maybe the girl) the smallest Illeiatic tablet.

Chess can be played in two ways: with an opponent or with his pieces. You play with an opponent face to face, man against man, will against will, the

arrangement of pieces is then only a reflection of the degree of submissiveness of one morph to another. Intelligence and experience in the game are of course not without significance here, although their role remains secondary, they are not decisive.

But you can play against the pieces, against the abstract strategic problem presented on the chessboard in front of you — no matter by whom, perhaps by no one, by the world, against whose adversities you fight blindly, without asking about the Cause and the Purpose. In the game in this second way, only reason has significance; in this way the slave can beat a kratistos.

A messanger ran in the labyrinth of chess arbors, transferring moves from distant chessboards. The games were probably set according to the layout of the occupied arbors and the current configuration of the Labyrinth's eternal machines connected to them. Certainly, the partners in the game changed between subsequent games. Having put the amulet to his nose, Mr. Berbelek easily won the first two games, in the third he went for destruction, finishing the enemy in an embrace between two elephants, in the fourth again White betrayed him in the opening, and the fifth was the most difficult, both proceeded extremely carefully, repeatedly securing each piece and building multi-level traps, Mr. Berbelek forgot himself in the game, forgot about the stinging scars, the terrible Lady and the inhuman Form Distorting the world, here again he saw only a pure and clear strategic problem, a challenge for the mind and the fascinating beauty of the mental structure, he was a connoisseur of such beauty, such beauty he created, sharp and shiny sculptures inside his mind, logical mechanisms of inevitable victory, he won and now; and the sixth round — another merciless slaughter.

The messenger stretched out his hand for the seventh time (was it still the same kid?), but Mr. Berbelek could not find any more tablets in his pocket. He pressed the white tube to his nostril again. He leaned against the skeletal wall covered in burning bindweed, and tilted his head back. The earth shone straight into his eyes. The moon was just passing over Asia, a swathe of gray clouds obscured Dzunguo. The messanger returned uninvited, threw a rolled-up note on the chessboard: *A challenge from Master Gemines, a personal rematch, an invitation for the Stranger.* Mr. Berbelek, chuckling silently, put it in his pocket.

There are two ways to play, and it's good that he remembered in time that

a strategos is more than just a leader with an overwhelming Form of order, courage, and obedience. In fact, a strategos always plays battles alone, in his head, by himself, and what the heck, he either wins or suffers defeats. Every problem, when taken out of someone else's morph and put back together in thought, can be solved and overcome — like any chess attack by those invisible players. It doesn't matter who he's playing with, he could even play like that with the Lady and still win.

He touched his scars one by one, as if performing a cleansing ritual, a gesture of prayer, a broken Christian cross. Everyone has been bleeding him lately, like from a sacrificial ox. The indescribable scent of the amulet burned through Mr. Berbelek's brain. His eyes filled with tears, he blinked, the green stain dissolved into the black sky. So tell me, Hieronim, where does this sorrow come from, where does this anger come from, why are you crying? What were you hoping for? Don't act like a child. No one will give you anything willingly. Of course you can't trust either Illeia or the Evening Maid. Everyone is an enemy, the only difference is that some enemies are destroyed, and others are used to destroy them. Set goals for yourself and outline a plan. Something that will work just as well in any Form. You can do it. You've done it before. You're made for it, it's in your nature. Sixteen, seventeen, eighteen, nineteen, twenty; good. Here's the puzzle. Now —

Who is your greatest enemy?

ξ

Like a Strategos

—THE challenge we face is essentially one: how to bring about a joint action against the Adynatos by all the kratistoi of Earth, and not under your leadership, but on their own initiative. All must come forward, or at least most of the lands of the narrow division of keros: Europe, Asia, North Africa. Anaxegiros and Urwald would be welcome, although their participation is not essential: they are safe in their remoteness and do not threaten in this remoteness to immediately fill the void left by other auras. You cannot command, nor even leave anyone directly dependent on you, so that it does not have the appearance of an attempt to impose your will. They must gather spontaneously, like a pyrownik spontaneously descending the orbits of uranoise. Something must attract them, some goal. So let's ask ourselves: What examples of similar events do we know from history? Well, the events that led to your Exile, for example. At one point, you had everyone against you; at least no one openly took a different position. They will unite if they feel directly threatened. That's obvious. But it's also obvious that we can't wait for the Adynatos to go so deep that cacomorphy becomes a universal threat on Earth. Yes, you're right, I can't wait. So consider my impatience as your unexpected opportunity; although you were expecting it, right? So. So here's what you have to do: connect the Adynatos' presence in the Earthly spheres with the danger that the kratistoi are already aware of and that is already affecting them. So that they cannot act against one without acting against the other. Then —then provoke the explosion of this pyrownik. How is it, for example, that the showers of fire never descend upon the Labyrinth and the other inhabited lands of the Moon?

You send astromekans to ignite false pyrowniks in the less stable orbits of the aether. The explosions rain down on the already scorched wastelands and the anaires' breeding grounds. Of course. You don't ask because you know who the greatest threat to the Powers already is and who to rain fiery doom on. I haven't forgotten. You know that I will stop at nothing, that it is stronger than any oath. I will succeed. It can't fail. I will do it; don't ask how. You know I can play games like that. It's not true that you weren't looking for a strategos. You need a strategos, a strategos is your only chance, intrigue and deception cold and impersonal, not based on the power of your morph, untainted by your morph. Army against army, nation against nation, order against order. All I need is an opportunity to open up to me. Just let me off the leash. Let me off the leash.

"Go."

IV

Π
The King of The Rats

THE sea battle raged for most of the night. In all, there were twelve nimrods and seven areses on board the ships — and one strategos — so anyone could have guessed the outcome;but the monster was indeed enormous. Its obscenely ripped body now floated on the calm waves of Okeanus, gleaming and sparkling in the pure light of the rising sun. Ihmet Zajdar watched the carcass, smoking a fat hashish, leaning against the crudely carved railing. He was still a little shaken from the night's fight, still feeling the taste of the wild hunt on his tongue, and in his muscles — that tension of an unfailing blow, the energy of joyful violence. In the superimposition of so many deadly auras, the keros here became sharp as a purine razor — it is said that a sailor from the "Euzelema" bled to death after biting his cheek in the excitement of the fight. Ihmet Zaydar handled the matches with great caution. The soft warmth of the hashish flowed into him in blue smoke, calming his nerves.

The sea serpent was more than a stadium long. Dead, floating helplessly on the turquoise waves, it seemed even larger than during the battle, at night, when they had only seen it in fragments and for brief moments — when it attacked. Ihmet had never heard of a monster that would attack a fleet of seventeen ships alone. He had never heard of an Air monster living underwater, either — but it was such an obvious cacomorph that Zajdar had not expected any rules or laws in its anatomy, any elegance of form; it would probably prove to be a unique creature, and no one would ever encounter anything like it again.

Ihmet could hear the sailors arguing below deck. They spoke of the "Curse of the Warlock." The nimrod smiled under his mustache. He did not know how much truth there might be in these suppositions — but of course the strategos would not pass up such an opportunity to start a rumor. After all, what was the probability that they would be attacked by an Okeanos cacomorph right now, right here, in the absolute sea wasteland and flattened keros, where sixteen rats of the greatest powers of this world had gathered? True cases — they are the hardest to believe.

The battle began just after midnight. The *Philip the Apostle* was at the western end of the cluster of ships, and the snake attacked from the east, and even after the alarm was raised it took several dozen minutes to organize a defense. But then Esthlos Berbelek imposed his command and the sailors stopped falling from the shrouds, the ships closed the formation, and the cannoneers began to turn the pyresiders with great skill and self-confidence. However, despite the two-hour cannonade in the heavy aura of ares and nimrods, the snake did not give up. He broke through the bottom of the *Shalabay*; If it weren't for a few capable demiurgoi on board, the ship would have gone under. The monster attacked from different directions, always revealing itself just before impact — there was time for one shot at most, and only from the nearest ships. Berbelek ordered for them to take up harpoons. The monster tore ropes and tore at the ships. However, this allowed for a slightly denser barrage. They hit him in the head, and he began to bleed dark gore. Then he puffed up like an Air Pig and burst out of the water, rising towards the stars. Harpoons were thrown at him from all decks, pyresider thundered after pyresider; Ihmet remembered the furious scream with which he squeezed the trigger of the keraunet. In the end, however, the beast's aerimorph proved too weak for the weight of the ships attached to it by harpoon ropes, and the cacomorph was dragged back to the surface of the sea. Ihmet then led a detachment of men with boathooks, axes, and saws at Berbelek's command; these were accompanied by three nimrods from neighboring ships. They leaped onto the monster's swaying, quivering back and hacked it apart along the spines, from the spreading horns on its square head to its flowery tail. All the ship's lamps and slags were lit, they worked in the night in the glow of yellow fire, some stinking fumes were steaming from the black body, they waded through stinking fog, in the cacomorph's aerial organs rising in pieces into the sky, their feet slipped in sticky secretions, they sank knee-deep into the monster's gelatinous entrails. Berbelek watched them the whole time from the bridge of the *Philip*, no one fell off the serpent, no one cut themselves

and no one drowned.

Ihmet washed himself twice afterwards, but he still felt as if his skin and clothes were covered in dark mucus; he could still smell the stench. He greedily inhaled the hashish smoke. The air itself was cold, hard, rough. Dawn in the first circle, in the second western leaf, in the middle of the Okeanus.

The ships had managed to disperse again. Zajdar counted the bare masts, counted the flags and traces of white foam on the surface of the sea. Three, four, six, eight, on the other side five more — had K'Azura's ship sailed away yet?

From the Nebuchadnezzar's ambassador's sailboat, a dingy bearing the golden emblem of the Kratistos slowly glided toward the *Philip the Apostle*, drawing a wide arc around the corpse of the cacomorph.

"It's cold."

He looked back.

The Strategos's aide wrapped herself more tightly in her white humiya cloak. Smiling knowingly at Ihmet, she leaned over the railing, crossing her forearms on the railing. That understanding between them was built on jokes, allusions, acidic quips and exchanges of understatements, and for the most part on what they did not say at all, silence.

"You're cold, you're never cold," he muttered. "You're steaming like a newborn puppy."

Aurelia ran her hand over her smooth skull, leaving fingerprints on her dark skin.

"The rain is unnerving me."

Before dawn, after the cacomorph had been killed, there had been a brief downpour, and a violent gale had additionally scattered the ships. Berbelek's aide usually hid from the rain; the nimrod thought it was more to avoid gossip and not to cause embarrassment to others than because of the real discomfort of being around water. Ihmet had met Aurelia just after Berbelek had returned to Africa, over two years ago. The Strategos had not yet introduced her in any way, simply that: she accompanied him; she accompanied him, carried out his

orders, and looked after his safety. She was a demiurgos of Fire — this became painfully obvious to Zajdar on that Babylonian night, when she reduced the thugs of Seven-Fingers' Grey Guard who had been sent against them to ashes: in her burning clothes, in a wisp of smoke and a halo of air rippling with heat, in the blink of an eye she burned the faces of the Babylonians, their chests turned into black craters of organic slag. They fell under plumes of greasy soot. That was one face of Aurelia the Thunderbolt. The second face appeared in such situations — when it rained, when she had to stay among ordinary people, and her morph excluded her from all social situations, into awkwardness, silence, shy stillness in a dark corner of the room, where perhaps no one would notice the demorphing of her eyebrows, the sparks dancing on her skin, the delicate smell of burning that always surrounded her, the insipid scent of the crematorium. However, Aurelia's nature was different (fiery). It provoked her to outbursts of sincere joviality, loud laughter, cries of surprise, admiration, anger as quick as a cobra's strike — that's how she managed to forget herself. Ihmet witnessed these outbursts, because they were usually really outbursts, and from this involuntary witnessing an understanding was born between the Persian and the girl. He didn't ask, he didn't mock, he didn't pretend not to see, and he didn't avoid her presence. After all, he knew nimrods so wild that they actually yearned for animal, pre-civilized, pre-human forms; he knew ares so aggressive that they were forcibly shackled at night so that they wouldn't scratch their eyes out in their sleep, so they wouldn't tear out their hearts; he knew demiurgoi psyche deprived of their own psyche. Of course, he didn't tell Aurelia that either — how would she take such comparisons anyway? — but since he usually didn't say anything, she could now approach him and freely start a conversation. Because there was also this third Aurelia: simply a lonely girl, cautiously seeking some contact with another person, since — as Ihmet imagined it and was not sure about this idea — since she had been thrown into a world, situations and among people completely alien to her, alien to her heart and alien to her mind. He would not be able to point out where this idea came from, from what signs he built it; the touch of the morph is soft and subtle. Aurelia spat over the side and winked at Zajdar. Shadows of Hades' fires flickered in her pupils. A sailor from the nearby "Aceus" cursed hoarsely in the silence of dawn, and the nimrod turned his head.

"Sometimes you give the impression that you've fallen straight from the Moon," he said, his gaze following the approaching dingy with Nebuchadnezzar's rat.

Out of the corner of his eye, however, he saw — out of the corner of a nimrod's eye — how Aurelia reflexively straightened up at these words and looked over her right shoulder. It took him seven heartbeats to understand: if he were visible at all now, that's where they should have seen him — The Moon.

He exhaled a blue cloud of hashish from his lungs.

"I wondered where he suddenly acquired such great knowledge about the movements of the celestial bodies and the life of the supernatural spheres. This Antidektes of his..." Ihmet rested his head on his hands. "The obsession with destroying cacomorphies — is supposedly the result of his son's death. Well, very nice. Meanwhile, she simply wants revenge for her Exile... It's a good thing I didn't pay him homage."

He saw arcs of sparks growing above her skull, and streams of gray smoke curling from the sleeves of her cloak.

"You served him for three years," she said quietly, and that was the first Aurelia. "Did he promise you something? A payment? An ideal? An enemy? So why did you serve and why would you back out now?"

"I will not serve her. Will you burn me?"

"I was told that this is what you are like. If you give your loyalty to a man who in turn gives his to someone you don't like — does that mean you no longer have to be loyal? What kind of loyalty is that then? What kind of loyalty? When you always choose and decide according to your own preferences — that's not loyalty, that's animal convenience. True masters are not chosen. They choose us. Do you think you can leave? Go and tell him that."

"I should have guessed earlier. For example, last winter in Alexandria, when I found you in the baths with Amitace and her ares, the whole form of that situation, how you looked at me... Ha! I couldn't understand why he didn't kill that viper. Manat blinded me, nothing else. Shulima was ingratiating herself with the Warlock in order to destroy him — already in Chersonesos — the kratistoi never forgive, never forget — I do not intend to play in the game —"

"Leave the knife alone."

The humiya cloak began to smolder on Aurelia's shoulders. She turned to face the nimrod, stepping away from the railing. The nearest sailor was a dozen

or so pous away, dozing behind a not-fully-untangled coil of thick rope. The dingy with Nebuchadnezzar's rat was emerging from behind the stern of the "Aceus". The wind was gently stirring the mane of the dead sea snake.

Ihmet did not straighten up, did not turn from the railing. He folded his empty hands symmetrically on the railing. He watched the monster's insides change color in the rays of the rising Sun.

"Would you believe that when I first met him, he was shorter than me, and even during conversation at the table, they didn't really listen to him, they jumped at his words? It was noble: to help Berbelek of Kolenica when he needed help, to lend strength when he himself didn't have it. But then he began to fill the next Forms given to him, each one greater than the last: lover, father, hegemon of the jurja, avenger, strategos. She's some kind of teknites psyche witch, isn't she? Shulima. Last month in the Argentorate smoking room... he was already talking about himself: a kratisticide, a kratistos killer. He'll go after the Warlock and die."

Aurelia moved closer to Zaidar, he felt a wave of warmth.

"But you are loyal to him" she whispered. "You care."

"You were not there when he took the fortress of Danzig with less than a hundred men in Sextilis. The rest of the defenders threw themselves on the rocks. You could feel that History was coming; we were a step behind her. It is not the same as escorting caravans and protecting ships."

"We will not abandon him."

He turned suddenly, catching her in his arms. The form was completely different now, Aurelia only threw her head back and laughed hoarsely (the third Aurelia).

Ihmet kissed her hot wrist.

"My granddaughters... you are probably even younger than them."

"Mr. Zajdar, what are you doing!" she smacked her lips loudly.

"Mr. Zajdar is high on hashish, you need fire to put out the fire, oh, your ass will smoke up."

She snorted hot sparks in his face. Cursing, he began to put out his mustache and beard. She laughed, walking away. The awakened sailor called out something to her in Gaelic. She blew him a kiss in the air.

"Even before the full moon! You'll see!" Ihmet shouted. "I always succeed in hunting! Ha!"

Without looking back, she waved her hand.

He watched as she turned towards the stern and disappeared behind the base of the mast. So the Moon, yes. Isn't that how Elking described them? "Of burning bodies and ash-burning souls." It was enough to look into Esthle Amitace's eyes. The Viper, the Viper. From the first moment I saw her in the circus — a smile, a gesture, a look, she was already trying to catch me in her net, to manipulate me. Esthlos Berbelek did not see this, because he wanted to be manipulated; but this is how a person becomes addicted: he no longer sees himself, only his reflection in someone else's eyes, and from there he draws his morph. Even when later, in Africa, Amitace yielded to him — she yielded to him, because that was the Hieronim Berbelek she wanted: one who would force submission. She, or rather her Mistress, the Moon Witch. Now Berbelek is stirring a new storm of history in Europe, raising a wave of old hatreds, that suddenly it is fashionable, right and only proper to turn away from the Warlock and raise banners against Moscow, that such is the Form of the end of the century. Everyone knows why he does it, everyone knows his name and his revenge, yes, Berbelek himself is such an obvious element of the story that no one asks anything. I didn't ask myself, the morph is overwhelming: Berbelek's Return. That's fashionable, right and the only right thing to do. The Witch knows it perfectly well: no one will investigate a hidden motive when there is an open, so obvious one. She needed someone to lead them to the Warlock — and she found Hieronim Berbelek, the perfect tool. All that was left was to bring him back to life. Attract power to the Forms, further confuse his mind with tales of universal cacomorphy, the ruin of his son, a lie so great that it cannot be refuted by its very size — and that's it: safe revenge by someone else's hands. Shulima still confuses his mind, present or absent, poisons his psyche, the black rat of Illeia. There is no way out of this vicious circle. He spat overboard. I have to kill her myself, I will kill the Viper. Before sending him to his death. He doesn't even need to mention it, he can't see anything. Someone should defend him from the Moon, though. Not Aurelia, after all.

Nebuchadnezzar's dingy slowly passed the peacock tail of a sea serpent stretched out on the rippling sea.

Aurelia Kruzos went down the stern gangway to the first subdeck, turned into the main corridor and stood before the doors to the passenger cabins. When the *Philip* was not carrying passengers; they were reserved by the captain, Otto Priinz, or the owner; now they were all occupied by Strategos Berbelek, since he was indeed the co-owner of the *Philip the Apostle*", as well as the entire merchant fleet of the Merchant House Njute, Ikita & Berbelek. Two Horrors with keraunets stood in front of the door, the heavy, voracious mouths resting in the crooks of their elbows — these "gluttons," with barrels like asymmetrical shells, were usually loaded with nails and gravel; in narrow rooms (like here) one of them would cut down everything alive with a shot. The Horror saluted Aurelia. She shook the ash from her humiya cloak and entered.

On the left, the shipowner's salon and cabin, on the right, luxurious cabins. The ship rocked slightly under her feet, she reflexively balanced herself with her body. Horizontal rays of the rising sun fell through the rosette porthole; she did not blink: nothing ever blinded her. She opened the left door without knocking.

"...to the influence of the Third Pergamon, if Marius Seleucid the Crownless stands before the walls of Amida. There the anthoses of the Warlock and the Seven-Fingers meet. Once you have this victorious campaign in Europe behind you, they will welcome you with open arms, Esthlos, I can say that for sure."

"In his name?"

"I always speak in his name. Unless I say that I don't."

Everyone laughed.

Aurelia entered and quietly closed the door behind her. A few heads turned in her direction, but no one commented on the arrival of the dark-skinned girl.

The spacious cabin was filled with the invisible smoke of harkaz incense, and she wrinkled her nose. She moved to the open wine cabinet (her bare feet made no sound as she waded through Nord furs and Persian rugs) and poured herself a goblet of Midas red.

When she turned around, Strategos Berbelek was standing over a map spread out on the table, tracing seas, mountains, and cities with his finger. She approached. He thought the wine was for him and took the cup from her hand. She nodded.

Berbelek drank, placed the cup behind the Urals, and looked inquiringly at Jacob ibn Zaza, the rat of the Kratistos Ephrema of the Sands. The rats sat in leather armchairs arranged in an irregular semicircle around the oval table. There were six of them — the eyes, ears, and voices of the Powers with whom Esthlos Berbelek had already formed an alliance of one kind or another.

Jacob ibn Zaza, the eidolon of Ephrem of the Sands, whose crown touches the crowns of Seven-Fingers and Nebuchadnezzar in the north, and who places his morph on the entire Jazirat al' Arab, all the way to the Eastern Ocean.

Esthle Anna Ormicka, the eidolus of Świątowid, Lord of Forests and Meadows, pushed beyond Vistulia by the armies of Moscow, now squeezed between the lands of the Goths, Celts, Nordlings and Huns and the anthos of the Warlock.

Ryter Olaf the Stained, the eidolon of Thor, whose crown reaches from the Baltic to the Northern Ice, and in whose morph is born equally hot madness and cold beauty.

Lapides, the angel of iron and bronze, the eidolon of Julius Cadetius, the King of Storms, the basileus of Oroneia.

Esthle Rabitia Szwejg, the eidolus of Rupert the Young, Protector of the Goths, whose aura borders match the borders of Gothland, from Thor to Leo Vialle, now also to Eric Helvetia.

Mussiya, the eidolus of Mauzalema, the weakest of the Indus Triplets, settled farthest north, the Sleeping Lover, in whose morph everyone finds the love of their life, with a crown rubbing against the crowns of Ephrem, Seven-Fingers and the Warlock; three hundred years ago the Warlock kidnapped, morphed and crucified the daughter of Mauzalema, since then the war has been going on between the princes of Indus and the Ural hordes.

Jacob ibn Zaza just shrugged in response to Berbelek's gaze.

The Strategos raised an eyebrow.

"The Seleucids have been on our backs for a hundred years now," Ephrem's rat sighed. "Officially, however, it is not the crown of the Grandfather of the Desert that protects them. Simply put: they went on a Pilgrimage to the Stone and did not return. They reside in the anthos of Al-Kaba. Perhaps, Esthlos, you should summon the ambassador of the Stone, he, he, he."

Aurelia looked at the map. It was a kerographic map: the colors, lines, and descriptions on it concerned the division of the world's keros, reflected the current balance of power of the kratistoi, showed the foci of their anthos, the directions of the decrease in the intensity of the morph, and the boundaries of the auras. The map covered Europe, northern Africa, and most of Asia. In the middle spread the purple stain of the Warlock's anthos, black pentagrams marked three Ural fortresses, Moscow and Rodezhgorod Aralsky. The Siberian trails of the tribes from under the morph of Santa Claus ended and began somewhere beyond the eastern edge of the map. Berbelek had placed a goblet in the very heart of the purple.

"The Seleucids have no army," the Strategos said. "Marius is not only without a Crown, but also without a Sword."

Aurelia recalled those walls of ancient citadels, burnt to a yellow bone by the sun, crude buildings rising somewhere from the hot sands, and thin guards on their battlements, roofs, towers, wrapped in black burnooses, only their eyes shining from between their turbans. From behind their backs protruded jagged keraunets with absurdly long barrels covered with verses of the Koran burned in Pahlavi. The half-savages looked at her with contempt — until their sandy garments burst into flames. Sand, sand, sand, in the air, in the water, in the skin, terrible sand whirlpools coming straight from the heart of the desert. Some are just blind phenomena of aer and ge, and some — embraced by the Form of life, true djinns, more dangerous than the largest lunar anaires. Then everyone hides inside those windowless buildings with walls two pous thick and waits out the howling of the geozoons, day, night, day. Such is the life of the peoples of the desert. But not of those wandering tribes, recognizing only the morph of Stone, scattered across the wastelands of sand and sun. They were the ones who smuggled Berbelek and his men to Babylon and back, silent camel and humiya riders, never revealing their faces, with Forms as hard as stone, honed by the most furious khamsins. She had heard that they knew the language of the djinn, that they spoke with the desert, with the rushing sand, their women went out on moonless nights to the hamada, they lay down under the stars with the howling

jinn, thus began the Iganazi, the Daimons of Khamsin, in whose veins the Earth rolled in black clods, just as Fire flowed in the veins of the Hyppyroi. Esthlos Berbelek went out that night to the hill of the ruins of Al-Razza to meet and make a pact with Marius the Seleucid. She followed him in secret, guarding him even against his will, as the Lady had commanded. Then she saw the monarch in exile in his true morph, in a sandy robe, rising from gravel and sand, an aristocrat of the Iganazi — this is how Maria Seleucid had survived her lonely escape through the hamada and from whose seed she had borne a descendant of an ancient people. Esthlos Berbelek had made an honorary alliance with him that night — a word, a handshake and mixed blood — the content of which she did not know. How many similar oaths had she already seen — perhaps he had received them in the name of the Lady (which she doubted), nevertheless it was to he and him who had been sworn, his Form they believed.

She poured herself another cup of Midaic red wine.

“We will not open a second front there in Pergamon” the Strategos continued “until the Seven-Fingers and John Blackbeard declare neutrality. Even the first front does not exist in practice, I ride from skirmish to skirmish and move a few hundred here and there, as the local rabbits allow me.“

Esthle Anna folded her fan loudly.

”You know very well, Esthlos, that it is not the case that kratistos summons the king and tells him: ‘now you will listen to Hieronim Berbelek.‘ In time, they will all begin to share his beliefs and the Form of new courage, opposition to the Warlock and hope for triumph will win; but it will take time, and the longest in the case of the aristocracy. Of course, the more victories you bring them yourself and the more hope you give them, the faster it will go. But at this point you should already start negotiating directly with the kings.“

”If you officially hired yourself as a strategos for someone,” Olaf muttered, ”you would have an army at your disposal right away.”

“If I were to hire myself” Berbelek snarled “you would immediately begin to suspect this king of hidden ambitions. I will have an army, but time, time, all this takes rhythms of time! He slammed his fist on the table, tearing the pergalon.

“What’s a few more years?” Jacob sighed, running his fingers through his

long, gray beard. “Maksym won’t escape you anywhere, Esthlos.”

“You don’t understand” Esthle Rabitia sneered. “Impatience is his strongest weapon, if he doesn’t infect them with it, all the rest is useless.

“What’s that aphorism of Kommarchus?“ Jacob scratched the bridge of his hooked nose. ”We were no longer young, so at least we were impatient.”

The Strategos jabbed a finger in his direction.

”You! You, Ephrem, he should know best! Didn’t he send hundreds of spies across the Nile and Dry, didn’t he buy out the Aegis and Axum caravans? Every year more means a stronger Twist, a deeper and further spread Skoliodoi, a stronger spawn of the Warlock. Eventually they will dig in so deeply that they will not need any support from Rog; he does not have to summon them anymore, they summon their own reinforcements from beyond the stars. Have you heard what Antidektes said about the orbits of Saturn and Venus? Should we wait until the sky falls on our heads, eh?!

”Maybe they summon, maybe they don’t summon,” Jacob counted in his melodious Greek. ”It is true that Rog had a Jewish grandmother and that he dabbled in Pythagoreanism, it is true that for centuries he has been throwing out some aborted cacomorphies from these Ural breedings, but—”

”But what?” The Strategos growled. He turned from the table to the old Arab. They were at least six pous apart, but Berbelek was tall enough that he still seemed to lean over and press his body against Ephrem’s rat. Jacob ibn Zaza grimaced, looked away, sunk deeper into his armchair. ”But what?” Berbelek fumed. ”You know it’s his job, but you’d rather not get directly involved in a war that won’t gain you any lands, right? You and Rabitia, only you don’t border the Warlock here. Do you want to retreat like the rest?” He waved his hand, embracing the invisible ships of the other rats with a gesture. ”For gods’ sake, have some imagination! One day he’ll stand on your borders and then what? What will you say to Anaxegiros, for example? Wait, none of your business, isn’t Herdon crooked yet? Idiots! Cowards! Kratistoi with hearts of doulos! Rot in your strongholds, wait for the Adynatos to come to your walls. Ugh!

They were silent, embarrassed.

The Strategos snatched the second cup from Aurelia and drank the rest of the Midaean wine in one gulp. The lunar pyrwine no longer made an impression on him, Aurelia knew that Illeia's venom had permanently bound Fire in his body, in his body and in his soul — the lampshades trembled from the cry of Esthlos Berbelek.

All these tirades, insults, tossing and turning over maps, all of this had an effect. After all, she had also participated in previous meetings of the rats on Okeanos (only three of them had arrived at the first call). They returned to their masters afterwards always slightly bent towards Berbelek's Form, with the imprint of his morph in their thoughts, words and behavior, they carried this testimony to the kratistoi; the reflected wave returned intensified. Of course, the kratistoi themselves will not succumb to the Form of any strategos, however powerful — but from now on they take this Form into account, include it in their plans and change them according to it. Here is a new tool to use. Maybe it can really be used to banish the Warlock? Maybe we will really gain something from it? Maximus really overdid it with these Arretesian cacomorphs, he should not have Crooked the keros. Let's give the Strategos a chance. Then a little more. Still more. If he succeeds — only a fool does not use the Form of victory.

So Esthlos Berbelek cannot suffer a single defeat. He will not have enough time to rebuild himself again. He must go from victory to victory, more and more spectacular. For now, he succeeded, but Aurelia knew — she exchanged glances with the Strategos, he smiled knowingly, sparks stung the corners of her eyes — but she knew that it could not last forever, even kratistos does not win forever. Even the most powerful kratista — because then everyone unites against her.

The ultimate goal of every Victory is Defeat — just as the goal of Life is Death. Who could be more aware of this than Hieronim of Kolnica?

The *Philip the Apostle* jumped on a wave, the ribs creaked, Esthlos Berbelek shook his head and turned to Lapides.

"So I must have my own army" he continued quietly. "I will have it. The question: When?"

"It is necessarily slow," said the angel. "Otherwise the markets will collapse."

Aurelia was still not convinced that it would not be a more sensible move

to transfer troops directly from the Moon to Earth. However, even Aurelia was aware of all the political complications that the appearance of the Lady's Armies in Europe would cause. Berbelek, Omixos and Lakatoia rejected the idea out of hand. What could they safely import from the Moon: Untraceable money to finance a local army. For two years, the smuggling of the Labyrinth's inexhaustible wealth had been passing through Oroneia, and Illeia the Cruel had been buying Berbelek's army.

"Right now, we are engaging two-thirds of the Mediterranean black markets," stated Lapides. "Your Aneis Panatakis, Esthlos, is transporting lunar gold and diamonds by Nile and caravans to Axum and Agorateum and through Eastern Okeanos to India and Dzunguo, where prices are still holding. We have already completely killed the British market. There is nothing more expensive than war."

"Kristoff was supposed to open a line to Ipon."

"Ryter Njute proved unable to convince Mr. Ikita, supposedly the Emperor has issued an edict closing the borders. Leaving aside everything else, that is, not even counting losses resulting from price drops, we cannot throw more than a certain amount of a given raw material in a year, otherwise everyone will guess the source by simple elimination."

"The kratistoi already know," Berbelek muttered.

"Not everyone either" Olaf noted.

"Certainly not the kings and the aristocracy. Not the people. You don't even reveal yourself to your own people. You act wisely. How many would follow you, Esthlos, if they knew you were drawing from the Moon's treasuries?"

"Illeia finances it, because she is most vulnerable to the Adynatos deformity."

"Maybe so, maybe not" Jacob nodded. "If I were you, Esthlos, I wouldn't be so sure about the Kratista's motives."

"But please, give me an army or funds yourselves, I'm open to suggestions!"

They laughed politely.

"The truth is" Anna Ormicka said "That Illeia is simply taking advantage

of the situation."

"Of course" the Strategos sneered. "Just like me, just like you. That's what it's all about. You'd only become suspicious if someone acted without any view to personal gain!"

"But you know what most people will think. We banished Illeia, we have the Warlock. We'll get rid of the Warlock..."

"She doesn't intend to come back."

"That's what she says."

"Since when has the Widower been a guarantee of safety from Illeia? Above all, you'll get rid of Skoliodoi. There's no alternative here, you won't work out any cooperation with the Adynatos, you won't work out a balance, you won't close the borders to the cacomorphy."

"That's why we accepted your offer, Esthlos" Olaf rumbled in a bass voice. "We have opened the fronts for you and we are considering your plan. "Illeia's greatest enemies are already arriving for these meetings. Appreciate it."

"You should raise the Moon's banner, kyrios" Aurelia said, returning with a third cup.

Everyone turned to her.

"Sooner or later..." Lapides shrugged.

"When you attack the Adynatos, in the heavenly spheres, you will have to use her fleet, her people. Do you want to wait until the last moment to reveal yourself? Your own kings will consider you traitors."

"This whole alliance could still fall apart" Jacob muttered. "You have no guarantee of most of the kratistoi yet. Above all, — you have not yet defeated the Warlock, Esthlos. We will not leave him and the Skoliodoi behind us. Everything in order."

"But you know how it will look." Lapides bit into a wheat cake. "At the last moment, every kratistoi will start scheming how to get out of here and, in the absence of others, wrest as much as possible for themselves."

"That's why I say: don't kill the Warlock," Jakub pressed. "If we banish him from Earth and he flees to his Adynatos, no one will scheme, because the danger will remain all too real: they will go to finish him off, him and them."

"Dancing on the edge of a knife," Lapides grimaced.

"Mauzalema does not consent to this," said Mussiya dryly. "The only thing that matters is the immediate execution of Rog. That is an iron condition.

"It is enough that we are in the majority," Berbelek stated, sitting on the edge of the table. "Then the rest will not dare to do anything in your absence. Because that not only the Warlock must be eliminated, but also his Arretes spawn, no one, I hope, doubts."

"Oh, except for Seven-Fingers, you will indeed find no one who would have any sympathy for the Widower," Jacob ibn Zaza observed "That is not the point here. We all agree that he is a scourge of the world, a black kratistos and a poison to the keros. Nevertheless, there are certain customs, unwritten laws, a way of behaving among the Powers, a certain form of relations between them. If we break it now and return to the tradition of the Kratistos Wars, the tradition of the Exiles of the weakest and the strongest... What will prevent some other coalition from forming against, say, Joseph the Just and the Huraths or the Ebony Meuzulec?"

The Strategos folded his arms across his chest.

"Has Joseph suddenly taken up black Pythagoreanism and connived with the Adynatoses?" He asked coldly.

"Oh, those are details, there's always some pretext."

"Details! If we're not really going to defend ourselves against cacomorphy, then maybe we should just give up right away!"

"Nobody's giving up. I'm just saying that in this way we're breaking tradition and establishing a new one.

Will we really like it?"

"As you say, hats off to you — just a little thing: Do we have any other way out?" Lapides was irritated. "There was peace for so many centuries, since the

last Kratistos War, so we accept the existing state as given for eternity. But no God has guaranteed it to us. We have to fight. The appearance of the world is always only a reflection of the current balance of power between the Powers.“

“Of course,” Jacob yawned. “It’s just strange that all of us who agree with this here are either old enemies of the Warlock or allies of the Witch. What a coincidence! He, he, he.“

“In the morning I had a joint embassy from Urjanna and Anaxegiros,” said Berbelek. “We will negotiate again tomorrow. Others have also sailed not only to listen to an empty offer.“

”They will join — Of course,” Jacob agreed, examining the tip of his carefully braided beard. “When they see that you are victorious. They will join the victor, yes.”

After the rats left, they were left alone for a moment. Porte looked into the cabin, but he had barely opened his mouth to ask about breakfast when he caught the master’s eye and stepped back from the threshold with a deep bow, the gray head only flashing in the ajar door. Aurelia herself collected the dishes and ashtrays after the guests.

The Strategos opened the wide porthole, letting in the cool air, and with a heavy sigh sat down in the largest of the armchairs, stretching his legs in leather jugras to the middle of the living room.

”I spoke honestly,” Aurelia said, extinguishing the incense. ”You should raise the banner of the Moon, kyrios.”

”Too soon, too soon,” he muttered. ”I am still too weak. The name llleia will frighten them.”

”There will never be an appropriate time, you will never overshadow her so that it has no meaning.”

”Too soon.”

”People are starting to guess, kyrios. Zajdar recognized me. Who knows what he imagines.”

”I will talk to him. This evening.”

He stretched, the armchair creaked.

"Antidektes?"

"He is asleep, he went to bed at dawn. Will he be needed?"

"Who now?"

"Nebuchadnezzar. Stay, kyrios?"

"Sit here. Oh God, I haven't slept all night, my eyes are closing. Like in war, like in war. What time is it? Do you think I've convinced them?"

"Yes. You're a good liar, kyrios."

He glanced at her suspiciously.

"I am a good liar... Since when did you become so smart?"

"Because everything about the Warlock is a lie, am I right?"

"Why do you think so?"

"I knew it!"

"Okay, okay, don't burn my carpet. Where did I make a mistake?"

"You didn't make a mistake, kyrios. It's just... I don't know how to say it. Well, to lie so consistently, you have to change yourself a little, the lie has to enter the morph to be credible. You can't lie against yourself, because it's obvious, so you have to first accept the Form of that lie, and now that you're inciting them all against the Warlock..."

"Yes?"

"You didn't hate him at all before, kyrios."

"What is it that a person doesn't learn about himself?"

"An enemy, that's for sure, and you had a reason for revenge; but it was more like admiration and respect. You convinced yourself of hatred along with the lie. I saw it. I've been with you for thirty months, I live in your morph, I even talk like you already. You lie very well."

"But all this may yet turn out to be true! After all, no one has any idea why they came to the earthly spheres. Rog really did send agents and rats, entire expeditions to Skoliodoi, and not only the African one; now we know that it was he who took over most of the Sadarian routes and factories in the Golden Kingdoms by force, he was the one who finished off the Alexandrian merchants. The last Pythagorean Revolt was financed by Moscow. And his grandmother really was a Jewess. For centuries she has been releasing cacomorphs from her Ural stables, the likes of which no one had ever dreamed before."

"Do you see how well you lie? You believed yourself."

"But it may be true!"

"Even if. You don't know that. You lie, kyrios."

He rubbed his forehead, leaving red marks on his skin.

"I am a strategos. Deception is in my nature. To deceive the enemy, to make them turn their backs, then strike. Honesty and simplicity lead to disaster.

"You are doing great, I swear."

"What do you mean, am I leprous?!"

She looked away, tilted her head.

"I don't know. Maybe I shouldn't have listened to the conversations about the affairs of the kratistoi... The form of the Fire Riders is different: face to face, in a fight to the death. All these intrigues are starting to twist me, distort me. I am no longer certain how I would behave in battle. Give me your word, kyrios, that you will let me fight."

"Has your armor not fallen apart yet?"

"I adjust it every time we return to the spheres of aether. Give me your word, kyrios. What are your plans now, back to Rome?"

He twisted his lips, staring at the ceiling.

"I need some loud, symbolic victory. Which, however, could be achieved with still small forces. When is the first installment to the Byzantine Horror supposed to arrive?"

"I told you, kyrios. On the twentieth."

"Time, time, to Sheol, time is running out. Have you seen where Venus rose today? That monster at night! Everything is crooked."

"Father said that it will be at least several decades before the Adynatos can carry out a regular invasion of the Moon and Earth."

"Yes, I know, the Lady can wait. But she shouldn't. Ask any strategos: whether it is better to attack an enemy who is weak and disoriented, or one who is already entrenched, hidden behind fortifications, with support drawn up. Because you still don't understand one thing: we can actually lose this war, not one battle, but the entire war, man can succumb to the Adynatos; and the anthropomorph will perish forever, not even memory will remain, not even ruins, not even a word, it will disappear, dissolve, demorph everything human. I'm not lying here."

"You believe in it, yes."

Nebuchadnezzar's Eidolus appeared at the meeting called by Strategos Berbelek for the first time. The Golden One had not responded to previous invitations at all. Now, however, he had sent a round-sail Okeanic vessel with a personal envoy. Nebuchadnezzar's rat turned out to be a certain Esthle Ignatia of the Ashakanids, and as soon as she crossed the threshold of the cabin, Aurelia understood that the Esthle and the Strategos knew each other. Berbelek was not surprised, because diplomatic pleasantries had been exchanged between the ships earlier and he knew the identities of all the rats — nevertheless, the form of their greeting definitely concealed something more than just ironic politeness.

The Strategos received Ignatia dryly at a private breakfast. However, since Aurelia was also present, her silent nephew with an Indian morph sat at the table with the Ashakanidian to maintain balance — a surprising choice for the confidant of the Aegyptian kratistos. So they sat opposite each other: Aurelia and the Indian, Berbelek and the Ashakanidian. The dishes were served to the ship by doulos under the supervision of Porte. The rest of the portholes were opened, a warm, fresh morning breeze blew, the smell of the sea chased away the heavier odors of perfumes and incense. The breeze itself was not strong enough to rock the *Philip the Apostle*, but in such a gathering of demiurgoi and

teknitoi of sea and wind it was always restless, fronts clashed, the Okeanos was turbulent — in the captain's salon of the *Philip* the tableware clattered, liquids splashed, several round fruits fell out of the bowl and rolled across the counter, caught in the final glory by Aurelia. It was a mistake, the fire shot out around her hand in a blue stream. Esthle Ignatia stopped in mid-sentence the report of the latest Alexandrian gossip, barely passing on to Berbelek the joking greetings from Alithea and Shulima and their mutual Aegyptian acquaintances. Blinking, she stared at Aurelia. Aurelia slowly put the fruit down and lowered her gaze. She would have blushed if blushing were not a contradiction in Form for her. Instead, she tied her humiya coat tighter and straightened the folds of her wide sleeves.

"Aren't you hot in that fur, my child?" Esthle Ignatia asked.

Aurelia slapped her hand against her thigh, thought better of it, and shrugged.

Esthle Ignatia herself was dressed in a light kafton dress with short sleeves and a white bodice squeezed under the breasts; the linen skirt reached the floor. The Esthle was as beautiful as one would expect from a living reflection of Nebuchadnezzar the Golden: shining, copper skin, hair as black as a pharaoh's wig, classic Alexandrian breasts with very dark nipples, a face with the features of Isis: a royal nose, high cheekbones, swallow-like eyebrows... It was a beauty so close to lunar ideals that it also affected Aurelia — an image of realized perfection. Esthle Ignatia did not have to further exalt herself; her pose, tone of voice, gesture and expression were merely a natural complement to the morph. It was enough to look at her — the neck would bend by itself, the gaze would fall to the ground, the throat would dry up.

Only the Strategos Berbelek and the Ashakanidian spoke.

"The work, as I see, is burning in your hands. We are impressed by your recent successes, Esthlos, really. Ruid, Agnazia, Danzig, and with the forces of Vistulia, Goths, Nordlings, indeed: The Strategos of Europe. The only problem is that, hmmm, thank you that the Golden One actively participated in her Exile and so that she remembers him."

"I do not understand your fear at all. In fact, she should be afraid and demand guarantees: she will open her sphere to you, she will expose herself to the blow."

"All of you and she alone; such a coalition did not exist even seven hundred years ago.

"Seven hundred years have passed and she rules the Moon. Seven hundred years have passed and what does she do? She buys herself an army on Earth. She acquires one of the most capable strategosi."

"I did not pay her homage."

"Oh, really? That would be something new for the Mother. But yes, yes, of course I believe you, Esthlos. Does the lover of the Evening Maiden still have to pay homage to the Cruel One herself?"

Aurelia sensed the change in Berbelek's morphology; not a single muscle moved, but the change was obvious to her. Here Nebuchadnezzar's rat threw the name Lakatoi, the truth about the identity of Esthle Shulima Amitace in Berbelek's face. There is no turning back now — they will part as allies or enemies.

"I always admire courage" the Strategos bowed his head to Esthle Ignatia.

"Oh, no one would accept your invitation if you killed me or imprisoned me now" the Ashakanid smiled. She motioned to a slave to pour her some lime water.

"Besides, one rat wouldn't be worth the head of Illeia's daughter anyway" Berbelek muttered.

"That's it. But consider, Esthlos, that for twenty years Nebuchadnezzar didn't even touch her."

"He didn't know."

"He knew."

"He didn't know. Well, yes, of course. I betrayed her. Unintentionally. Through the Library. A book that shouldn't have existed. I gave them my name. Who was that librarian — Berenice? I let her go, she reported. My mistake. "

"I don't know anything about that, Esthlos."

“Is Shulima still alive?”

“Of course. Think about it, Esthlos. Only a living one will fulfill her role.”

“A hostage.”

“Of course. Until the war ends and everyone returns to Earth, to the old order. Then Esthle Amitace will be able to leave Alexandria. Why would Nebuchadnezzar bring Illeia’s wrath upon himself? Shulima will go free, not demorphed.”

“So that’s his condition.”

“The Skoliodoi is a thorn in Aegypt’s side. Nebuchadnezzar will join, of course. If he has a guarantee of safety and benefits.“

“Did he discuss this with the other kratistos?”

“The matter of Esthle Amitace? Did he have to? Think about it, Esthlos. For several years now, she has been residing practically without interruption in the Golden Crown, living under his watchful eye.“

The Strategos tapped his knife on the plate with the rice pate, one, two, three, four, five; he looked thoughtfully at the seemingly unmoved Aegyptian.

“If you are suggesting that this was Illeia’s plan from the beginning and Shulima consciously returned to Alexandria to serve as a guarantee of safety for the kratistos...“

“You had to know about it? You didn’t have to. “

“You are wrong, you are wrong, this was not in the plan, the Lady did not foresee the offensive until several decades later.”

“So what are you doing here?”

“She is her only daughter, her only living child.

“It is not without reason that they call her Cruel. Besides, what can we know about the feelings of the kratistoi?“

Berbelek shook his head.

"The feelings of the kratistoi — it would indeed be better if they did not have them at all, as they are described in poems and plays. Unfortunately, this is not true."

Aurelia assumed that Esthlos Berbelek was referring to Maksym Rog at that moment, who had fallen into the morph of the Warlock for no other reason than out of rage and despair after the death of his wife. Which century was it that he took revenge on the world and people? The nightmare that deformed half of Asia and Europe, mountains, rivers, forests and cities, languages, religions and nations, giving birth to nameless cacomorphies of man and animal in the darkness of the Urals — was a reflection of one, very specific Form. Except that the Strategos was wrong: this was precisely the subject of the most numerous dramas and ballads, the Widower's Mourning. Aurelia herself had seen several street performances. Xenophanes had already written that people create gods in their own image and likeness.

Over wine (some diluted malt from the Rhone), the conversation briefly returned in tone and subject to its initial lightness, to jokes and platitudes. However, before they said goodbye, the Strategos changed its form again.

"Perhaps he has not yet made a decision, he has no say in the matter," he said, passing Esthle Ignatia some lit tobacco. "Will the Hypatia send troops to Skoliodoi? Will Nebuchadnezzar join the raid through the star spheres? Like the others, he is probably waiting to see first in whose favor the victory will shape up. But what will he do if it shapes up favorably for the Adynatos?"

"Do not forget, Esthlos, that Nebuchadnezzar has The Seven-Fingers on his eastern flank."

Berbelek exhaled blue smoke from his lungs and laughed hoarsely.

"Is that the price? On the southern flank he has the Skoliodoi — but will he haggle for his own chance of survival?"

"Why not? Aegypt occupies a key position: between the Skoliodoi and the Seven-Fingers and the Warlock, at the meeting point of their auras. Look what you've haggled from the Witch!"

They were both laughing now.

Aurelia didn't understand the laughter, so just in case, she kept quiet. Esthle

Ignatia's Indian nephew probably didn't understand anything and kept quiet on principle.

"A trifle, really, a trifle!" the Strategos laughed in the meantime. "Write it down, Aurelia. So what exactly is this price, Esthle?"

"The Death of the Warlock" the Aegyptian winked at him. "The fall of Babylon."

"No problem. Did you write it down?"

Aurelia tapped her temple with her finger.

"We have the next week off, Esthlos. In Dies Mercurii you will destroy the Great Wall in Dzunguo and that will be it."

"So we have an agreement!" The Ashakan woman rejoiced, getting up from the table "How nice it is to negotiate with a suzerain who does not have to ask for the consent of any lord!"

Berbelek kissed the Aegyptian's wrist and walked her to the door. The Horror returned with a salute. The Esthle waved her fan again. The Indian nephew bowed stiffly.

Upon returning to the living room, Berbelek threw out his cigarette butt through the porthole and spat after the cigarette butt.

"Either she's gone stupid in her old age, or there's some intrigue in this that I don't see yet."

"Who?"

"Illeia, who else?"

Nebuchadnezzar just bought Mesopotamia in exchange for Shulima's life.

"Are you really going to attack Seven- Fingers?"

"Do I have another option?"

Aurelia ran her hand over her naked skull, sparks danced in her eyes, black smoke appeared in her nostrils. Berbelek looked at her, frowned. She didn't lower her gaze.

"If Lakatoia had died while in Nebuchadnezzar's captivity," she said quietly, "he would have done everything to avoid the Lady's wrath."

A blindingly bright sun was pouring in through the porthole, outlining the Strategos' figure and illuminating Aurelia's face; she did not blink. The ship creaked and creaked, rocking gently on the waves, the sailors shouted, a chain on a windlass jingled, the second Neptunia was called back on the bridge. A minute, two, three. Aurelia watched the Esthlos, heated; she knew that he was now turning numbers in his mind, like a pious Pythagorean.

"I think you have been with me too long."

She knelt down and kissed the ring on the finger of the offered hand.

"Kyrios."

I will kill the Viper, I will kill her. He smiled under his mustache, passing the Horrors. Now she is my prey; she will not escape me. I will tell him that I must go to Alexandria in any case. He cannot forbid me. He will not guess, he has no right to guess. He will thank me soon. Even if he does not — I owe him this favor. I am indebted. Manat, Allah, Ohrmazda, grant me peace and strength. He knocked. Old Porte let him in. The Moon woman was not with Berbelek. Together with Captain Otto Priinz and Heinemerle, Trept was leaning over the unfolded navigation atlases. Trept was writing something in her pilot's journal, she didn't even look at the nimrod. He felt the palms of his hands getting damp with sweat — but in their presence it was normal.

"Esthlos."

"Allow me" the Strategos nodded to him.

They passed under the stern bay window. The doors and windows were pushed open, the warm glow of dusk blew through to the cabin, and when they stood in the passage, their shadows disturbed the order of light and semidarkness. Someone shouted to the doulos to light the lamps. The Strategos had to bend down so as not to hit his head on the doorframe, the shadow bent gracefully.

"Are we sailing away?" asked Ihmet, not looking at Berbelek, looking out at

the okeanos. He ran his right hand over the black Herdonian kaftan, mechanically smoothing out invisible wrinkles and wiping away sweat.

"Not yet, a few more turns; they also negotiate among themselves and the terms are constantly changing. Have you told anyone about Aurelia?"

"No, Esthlos."

"This campaign is ultimately aimed at the Skoliodoi and their inhabitants, you know that. We are financed by the Moon. They were the first to suffer. Does that bother you?"

"Oh, so I have to be honest!"

The Strategos laughed, clapping him on the shoulder.

Ihmet gave him a distracted look.

"You wouldn't pretend to be a jovial friend to me now if you really wanted my honesty, Esthlos."

"You wouldn't betray yourself to Aurelia if you really wanted to harm me. Talk, I don't have time."

"Let me go. I traveled with you because I wanted to. You don't pay me, I didn't pay you homage, my word doesn't bind me."

"How can I let you go? I don't pay you, you didn't pay me homage, my word doesn't bind you. Please, go wherever you want. Why do you ask me for permission"

"If I left without an explanation..."

"But what exactly is your explanation? Are you sick of Aurelia's company?"

Ihmet frowned, cleared his throat.

"I don't want to be a part of this. I believe you have fallen victim to Illeia's intrigue, Esthlos. It will end badly for you.

"A plot aimed at...?"

"Revenge on her enemies. Maybe a return to Earth."

“Ah, so now you will leave me in such trouble!”laughed the Strategos.

The nimrod bared his teeth, jerked his head, his fingers curved into claws, his muscles tensed, his nostrils widened, he growled hoarsely from deep in his throat.

”You are being set up!” He spat. “Set upon!”

Strategos Berbelek watched him carefully, suddenly becoming serious. He still stood hunched under the bay window, but now he seemed to be leaning over the Persian, who was about to attack wildly, with some fatherly concern. Although he was clearly younger than the nimrod.

“Today?” he muttered.

“Yes!“

“Where to?”

“I’ll go back to Aegypt. I have unfinished business...”

“Ah.” The Strategos looked out at the sea, red in the rays of the sinking Sun. A few hundred pous from the ”Apostle” two galleons were bobbing on the waves. He indicated them with a movement of his head. ”Meuzulekov’s Brute” is returning to Sala today, there the Esthlos Anujabar will put you on the first ship of the African Company to Alexandria.”

”Thank you.”

”Come in after the tenth Neptunia, I’ll give you letters to Alithea, Shulima, and Panatakis.”

“I will deliver them as soon as possible, Esthlos.“

“I have no doubt.”

They stood in silence for a moment; there was nothing left to say. Berbelek mechanically brushed a flake of dried tar from Zajdar’s jacket. He glanced at the captain and pilot, who were looking at him impatiently. He waved his hand for them to wait a bit longer.

“I’ve always wondered about that...” he began in a low voice.

“Hmm?”

”That from the very beginning, remember, in Vodenburg, at the circus... You’d only just seen her, and you immediately remembered the Crimean Homage, and your first thought: kill her, kill her.“

“Who?”

“You’re a nimrod, I know, but you can’t behave like that in all similar situations. Fine, you owed me a debt of gratitude. That still doesn’t explain... I’ve been thinking about this for a long time. You know she competed in the Black Olympics? The Hundred Beasts. Of course. If we can even talk about any laws of Form between people... People and animals... For example, in a pack of wild dogs. I used to breed dogs, did you know? In a pack of dogs — there may be a few dozen of them, but let in a second leader and they recognize each other immediately, morph will turn against morph, it’s like with magnets, there’s no way to avoid this attraction and repulsion. They don’t tolerate each other’s presence. Kratistos and kratistos, ares and ares, strategos and strategos. Nimrod and nimrod. Their Form imposes a completely physical aversion. Do you remember how you reacted? A word, a gesture, a look is enough. You don’t understand it yourself, but you know you have to attack first. Have you ever been to Kaphtor?”

“I often sailed on the routes to Knossos and Kydonia.”

“You can still find ancient paintings there, bronze figurines, smoothed by time and the hands of dozens of generations of believers. She offended Illeia Potnii, when she walked on those hills, through those groves, there blood flowed for her. Look at it. Even the most crude images. The form will tell you a lot.”

“I will do it for sure, Esthlos.”

The Strategos retreated to the cabin, straightened, stretched with a loud groan.

“What did you say, Ihmet? That you would do when you left work? Practice happiness?

“That was my intention.”

“Do you know what Aristotle believes happiness is? Acting in accordance

with the nature proper to man. I envy people who know their own nature so well. I hope you will be happy.“

“I will do everything to that end, Esthlos.”

“Go, go. Letters after the tenth, don’t forget. I will give you a boat to the *Bruta*. Give them all my regards. Farewell.”

P.
Rules of Execution

THE first line of behemoths collapsed under the fire of pyresiders from the outer ramparts. Ashavillo's banner, the hundred-year-old Ares of the Asian steppes, waved over the Grain Pits— grapeshot salvos bursting from there battered the bodies of the behemoths, crushing their bones and ripping open their black hearts. Everyone — except Aurelia — had their eyes watering profusely from the pyros smoke spreading along the foreground of Kolenica; gray clouds obscured the walls of the castle itself.

A nimrod with a long-range keraunet was perched on the Kolenica minaret, and before the "Łamichmur" demolished the mosque, a Moscow fighter managed to shoot down a dozen or so Vistulians from there, including three behemoth riders. One of the morphezoons then got out of control and escaped from the fire to the north, across the river. Later, news came from the local peasants about a beast from hell roaming the country, trampling villages and trampling forests. Aurelia asked the Strategos to let her join the unit sent to tame or kill the animal. Hieronim Berbelek refused. She promised him loudly that he would not stop her from taking part in the battle anyway. He shrugged, not even taking his eyes off the Herdonian opticum. Ashavillo had just left the trenches behind the ruins of the Grain Pits and rushed towards the gates of Kolenica, fighting his way up the slope towards the moat with about twenty of his surviving men; The ares' banner, torn by a voracious hail of nails and stones — a rag dyed in gray-green diagonal stripes — fluttered in the morning wind, now disappearing, now emerging from the clouds of battle dust and pyros

smoke.

Hieronim Berbelek raised his right hand above his head.

"Now! Onward!"

A double pick-up was played. Aurelia covered her ears, her eardrums bursting from the high-pitched wail of the trumpet: The trumpeter stood just below the top of the hill, on which a heavy opticum had been set up for the Strategos. Even without a telescope, Aurelia could see almost the entire foreground from here, that is, the part of it not covered by the mass of the city. She saw the movements of the troops like the shifting of verticals on a tactical map, the lines of the besieging trenches and defensive entrenchments like a parallel ornament on a green bas-relief (spring traditionally flooded Vistulia with a flood of lush greenery, even here, in lands removed from the touch of the Światowid anthos). The third day of watching the battle from here, looking from the point of view of the Strategos — she felt a bit like a strategos herself. Even now: she knew from where and in what direction the Mazovian cavalry would strike at the signal of the trumpet, before the half-hundred riders had even emerged into the sun from the shadow of the western grove.

The behemoths, stretched out in two ranks, moved aside obediently. (They had only fourteen of these morphezoons, Esthlos Berbelek had not managed to borrow more from the southern garrisons — one had fallen, and one had escaped.) The cavalry jumped out from behind the line of hunchbacked monsters, galloped up the slope of the Kolenica hill, jumped over the abandoned ramparts and was already sitting on the necks of Ashawilla's group. The pyresider fire from the walls followed the riders, but most of the bullets missed, and the charge did not lose pace, did not lose direction (it had no right to) and caught the opening city gates before they closed again behind the men of the steppe Ares.

The behemoths did not sit idle either: after letting the horses through, they did not retreat at all, but — the trumpet wailed: Forward! Forward! Forward! — but trotted majestically in their wake; and behind the behemoths — the infantry raised from the lower trenches. The assault rose up the Kolenicki hill like a triple Okeanic wave, each successive slower, but greater than the previous one. Aurelia watched this, involuntarily biting her lip and clenching her fists, leaning against the breastwork embankment that surrounded the hill from the north. The officers and messengers gathered here shouted in Vistul, Muscovite,

Gaelic and Greek and laughed hoarsely. Single sparks shot up from the collar of the Moon Woman's leather jacket. Only the Strategos stood by the massive opticum in silence and immobility.

Suddenly he raised his right hand a second time.

"Now! On one!"

Aurelia managed to cover her ears. The sound of the trumpet floated over the battlefield. The assault units were waiting for this signal — with ladders, ropes, hooks — emerged from the trenches and moved towards the walls of Kolenica from all sides. Even Aurelia, who was already accustomed to Berbelek's morph, was amazed by the soldiers' cohesion in this maneuver. They reached the moat almost simultaneously.

The fire from the keraunets and pyresiders from the further trenches increased to provide cover for the assaulters; the defenders responded with similarly increased fire from the walls. But through this cannonade, through the sound of the trumpet and the shouts of the soldiers, the roars of the behemoths could be heard without difficulty. The siege beasts, under whose footsteps the earth shook, reached the moat; here one of them fell, rolling into a muddy hole. The rest of the behemoths advanced at their majestic gallop, despite their mangled sides and heads stripped of skin to the bare bone, despite the streams of black blood marking each step, despite the constant fire, tearing off chunks of dark flesh steaming from them in the morning chill. The behemoth riders crouched on their necks behind iron shields, tugging through the chain harnesses with the hooks of their bridles.

The cavalry was of course not suited to conquering the city and fighting in the streets; they were only supposed to jump in time and secure the gate. With the arrival of the first behemoth, they retreated along the embankment and fled along a safe route between the trenches. Fired on from the rear, they lost several more men and animals in this retreat.

Meanwhile, the behemoth was tearing the gate to shreds. Burning oil was poured on its back. Having trampled the remains of the metal towers, it roared into the city, dragging behind it a banner of fire and smoke; thus it disappeared from the sight of the besiegers.

But more beasts were already advancing, and behind them heavy infantry,

with sharks, scythes and wolfish man-eating morphezoons on chains, with two army areses in the ranks. The greatest fire came from the battlements against their standards, but it was also thanks to these high-raised standards that the attackers advanced so quickly and confidently, pouring through the gate in a wide stream.

Thumpppp! — everyone on the hill shuddered. Once again the catapult, built at night in a nearby grove, sounded, a large, crude machine made of wood and rope, wound up and released several times an hour. It threw huge vats of alkali pyros potions prepared by Antidektes the Alexandrian over Kolenica, which disintegrated in flight in the sky above the city and fell on its roofs and streets in the form of stinking rain. Once every three attempts this rain ignited and then liquid hell poured down from the blue onto Kolenica. One tenth of the city was already burning; more would burn.

Aurelia waited for a fountain of flames — this time in vain. Oh, if only the lunar mechanics could get down to it, if only there were a triplet of Hyppyroi here...! She thought of the rows of catapults built on large-scale perpetua mobilia made of bright uranoise, self-winding every minute; of pyrownik being thrown down from the sky at the enemy, leaving only black craters and hot glass after their impact; of the Fire Riders' raid, who would raze this city to the ground in a few moments...

"They will fall! They will fall!" Captain Polański said excitedly behind her. Esthlos Ludewig Polański had been sent here by the King of Vistulia to "supervise the actions of the Strategos Berbelek-z-Ostrog and to take care of the army entrusted to the Strategos." In reality, he supervised nothing and had no care for anyone: from his first meeting with Berbelek, he had followed him like a dog hungry for affection. "Do you see what's actually going on there? Did we enter? Have they hung a white flag?" He switched chaotically from Vistul to Greek, and Aurelia understood every second word he made.

The Strategos tore his eye from the eyepiece, straightened, and stretched.

"Retreat," he said, sticking to Greek because of Olaf the Stained and Haser Obol, the Ismailite. "Recall the troops from the walls. Withdraw the behemoths. The infantry remains at the gate, we secure the approach and the southern wall. Fire on the fourth and fifth towers. Rest, wounded, report; Officers at my place at noon.

“After all that...” Esthlos Polański bristled.

“Do you think that Krypier did not have a second line of defense prepared inside the walls? At least he inherited that much cunning from Słoneczko. Every day, every hour is a new chance for him to help. They stopped, they are being pushed back, the reflected wave is coming back. Look. They are trampling each other. The momentum has already been lost. I want a report on what these inner fortifications look like from the ground. I will send it to you as soon as you spot the *Cloudbreaker*. Porte, qahwa.“

”Here, sir.”

They went down to the tents. The Strategos' tent was by no means the largest, nor was it in the middle; in fact, it was placed at the back of the camp. They waded through mud, heavy rains fell every night (which was very favorable to the defenders, so maybe it was their work). Before entering Berbelek's tent, they were hewing boots from lumps of clay and tow of trampled weeds; sharp-edged planks had been driven into the ground for this purpose. Aurelia was the only one walking barefoot.

The tent was definitely too small for seven people; they had to sit down right away. Only old Porte remained on his feet, bustling around the stove. The flap was left ajar. A tall Horror in full coal armor, with a slasher on his shoulder, stood in front of the entrance.

Unfortunately, he was one of only ten Horror soldiers currently at Hieronim Berbelek's disposal.

Haser Obol, a thousand-man of the Byzantine Horror, followed Aurelia's gaze.

”Today or tomorrow,” he said.

”Either way, we're sailing for Danzig now.”

Obol's army had been paid in advance and had theoretically been under Berbelek's command since the beginning of the year. But first they had to be transferred to the battlefield. Meanwhile, only the hegemon Haser accompanied the Strategos with ten horrors, more as a symbol than actual military aid. His tent stood right next to it. Above the multi-cone of dark canvas, the banner of The Horror waved: a red fist in a black cogwheel on a white background. The

Strategos intended it to give Krypier Cudzybrat something to think about. It probably did — the faster Cudzybrat would have sent for reinforcements.

Esthlos Berbelek sat down in the corner; unbuttoning his kirouffa, he crossed his legs. Aurelia wondered at the Strategos' fondness for African robes. The servant handed him a cup of hot qahwa. Berbelek drank the scalding liquid without blinking.

One-eyed Janna-z-Gniezno, Berbelek's deputy from the time when he was one of the field marshals of Vistulia, was scribbling something furiously on maps spread out on the lid of a trunk, which she had first kicked to a wobbly stool. Janna seemed to Aurelia even older than Porte. A black headband ran diagonally across her wrinkled forehead, covering her left eye socket, through her gray hair, pulled into a long braid. Janna joined the Strategos as soon as her contract in Kazimir IV's army ended, last summer, after Berbelek's first raids on Moscow's advanced garrisons. From then on, she remained in the pay of the Moon. More importantly, she was one of the few among Hieronim's people who realized that she was being paid by the Moon. She didn't seem particularly offended by the fact, but she had had a distinct antipathy for Aurelia since their first meeting. They hadn't exchanged more than a few words in those six months. Aurelia was curious about the cause of Janna's disability — could it be that she couldn't afford the services of any teknites soma? — but she didn't dare ask. Maybe the Vistulian was really going senile.

"I know that Słoneczko is standing with half of the Third Ujad on the Burzna line" Janna was now mumbling, incoherently, to herself or to Esthlos Berbelek, who was looking at her over the rim of his bowl. "The garrisons in Kolno, Czertycz and Niżwy are closer, but they won't move, they have orders to sit on their asses and guard their own lands. Trepiej and Trzeci remain. Let's assume that Cudzybrat sent him an emergency call as soon as we crossed the border... Considering the rains... Four days."

"But you mean only the cavalry?" Olaf made sure.

"Yes, Trepiej's cavalry could arrive here in four days — That second fifty-odd cavalry, the idiot you sent across the river — is coming under increasingly strong reconnaissance, groups of a dozen riders. For now, these are just regular patrols, but someone could send a larger force here at any moment — Ugh, if I were Trepiej, I would have sent one long ago, even out of parental concern. How many have we intercepted? —Ten messengers? A blind man would have

noticed. At any rate, I certainly have."

"Jopałło has orders to fall back." Esthlos Berbelek slowly slurped the qahwa.

"Jobałło, you don't have a louse, just to bite and jump away. You know the cavalrymen. Maybe they won't have a chance after all."

Waves of heat flowed from the cast-iron stove, Aurelia subconsciously turned her face towards the fire. Porte bared his yellow teeth at her in a broad smile. He brewed qahwa, thea and pashuba at the same time, adding various exotic spices to each drink, regularly delivered to him by NIB in tin boxes with the coat of arms of the Merchant House. The tent was soon filled with a mixture of sharp smells, even the horror man looked inside.

The pashuba was for Captain Polański. It had recently become very popular in Central Europe (which Esthlos Berbelek used as another argument to prove the Warlock's Arretesian influence).

"I should really leave you now..." Polański rubbed his nose in embarrassment. "Rog would draw conclusions from my presence here that —"

"Yes, yes" Janna interrupted him "we all know: the quarrelsomeness of the Strategos thirsty for revenge, the private war of Hieronim Berbelek, in the event of defeat Kazimir and Światowid will wash their hands of it."

"What!" Polański became indignant. "Maybe he will stay to testify before Trepiej on behalf of Thor?" He jabbed his finger at Olaf the Stained. The rat of the Nord kratistos shrugged.

"Thor has been waging open war on the Warlock for years. He has nothing to hide. We will gladly welcome the Strategos Berbelek on the northern front."

"He is waging war, exactly! Rog never went with an army to the Nordland, you only clash in those festive border skirmishes and send pirates to each other's ships."

"Peace, peace!" The Strategos growled. "Or I'll chase everyone away! We haven't won, but we haven't suffered defeat yet either. I'll lead the assault at night, we'll pull up the pyresiders with the behemoths and go deep into the city. Only if Krypier hasn't prepared some miracles there. Where's Bartosz's report?"

"I'll go with you, kyrios," Aurelia said. "If you want to lead the attack personally... I'll go with you."

"I don't know if it's a good idea for you to risk yourself like that, Esthlos" Olaf said, carefully placing the cup of thea on his knee.

"An attack under the strict morph of a strategos, there's still a chance in that" Berbelek stated. "Without additional support... I see no other hope for a quick breakthrough."

Aurelia shook her head. The smoke of suppressed anger began to bite in her throat.

"The entire Byzantine Horror will sail here in two weeks at the most, the first sernia could appear at any moment. I don't understand, kyrios. This is stupid. The Warlock won't escape, the Adynatos won't escape. Wait."

"If we do not take the city within the next three days, we will have to withdraw," said Strategos Berbelek, putting down his empty cup and reaching into the inside pocket of his kirouffa for a citron. "Read the war manuals, what they say about sieges. The ratio of forces should be at least three to one in favor of the besiegers, and in truth ten to one is recommended. What is ours? One to two or three. I have eight good pyresiders, a dozen behemoths; a little over a hundred cavalry and five hundred regular infantry, another five thousand hastily prepared volunteers; who are basically just lying in the trenches, huffing from keraunets, eating provisions and provoking brawls. Krypier Cudzybrat, on the other hand, is in Kolenica with a garrison of one and a half thousand Third League; he's been sitting here for almost seven years, he's insured himself perfectly, he was ready, the front line ran dozens of stadia to the west of here. It's a great success that I managed to lock him up in a regular siege at all. What is this attack of mine? Madness. Suicide. Extreme risk-taking. Maybe if I had a traitor inside, a complete surprise and open gates... But like this? All he has to do is wait for relief."

"Why then...?"

"Because I have to win this victory. Do you know what all the newspapers in Europe will write when Hieronim Berbelek takes Kolenica from the Warlock?"

"So this whole battle is about the headlines...?"

“About what they reflect.”

”You should wait for The Horror, kyrios” she repeated.

“No. He already knows that I’m coming for him. Now, despite everything, I could still cross the front here and surround Kolenica; In a moment, I would have to win a regular war first to even approach the city walls. There is a moment and a time for everything, and now such a time has opened up — now I can build a Form of victory that will carry me further on its own, like an aetheric epicycle. But a year earlier and a year later — it would be too early, too late, I would be banging my head against a wall.“

“It is a certain skill, similar to sailing skills” Thor’s eidolon muttered. “To catch the wind of History in your sails, when it blows in your direction.”

“What kind of skill” Janna screeched “is the ability to always turn so as not to be screwed by History similar to?“

After exchanging a few sentences with the guard, a muddy messenger entered the tent with a post-assault report. He saluted the Strategos and began to blurt out numbers, names and descriptions of positions in a stream of broken Greek. Aurelia waved her hand and walked out in front of the tent. After a moment, Olaf the Stained joined her; he still had a cup of steaming thea in his hand.

Aurelia looked at the Nordling askance.

“What will Thor say?”

“Thor won’t say anything. Thor just bangs his fist on the table.“

“And?”

“And why do you think I came here with you?”

“To report to Thor, on whether it is worth betting on Hieronim Berbelek. Will he get Kolenica; and how will he do it; and what Thor would think about it?

”That too.”

She frowned. What was he suggesting? If this really were some secret of the Kratistos, he wouldn’t have consciously led her to it. After all, he knows she’ll

repeat all this to the Strategos. So he's lying. But what exactly does this lie sound like?

"Are they afraid of him already?" she whispered.

"If he is actually capable of defeating the Warlock... An idea. Illeia may not return, but he will remain here. Whose lands will he want to carve out his domain from?"

Aurelia looked at the rat with open disbelief.

"They're already afraid of him!"

"He wants to kill kratistoi, doesn't he? Of course they were concerned."

"Meter! I don't believe it. So what, will they leave him to the mercy of the Warlock?"

"No, no, the Widower is actually the biggest threat, we need to get rid of him and The Twist. But what then?"

"The Strategos will have to face the Power of Adynatos, it is unknown whether he will return at all or whether he will return as a Berbelek. It's most likely a suicide mission."

"You see. Here he will have great power, great fame and a great name. Why would he abandon it all — to almost certain death? Man knows no such motivation."

Aurelia was already openly staring at Olaf, clouds of hot steam coming out of her half-open mouth.

"What exactly are you trying to warn the Strategos about? What does Thor want from him?"

He shrugged, lowering his gaze to the inside of the cup.

"Nothing, nothing, just a few thoughts."

Without another word, she left Thor's eidolon under Berbelek's tent.

Her own tent was at the other end of the camp (Esthlos Hieronim had forced this). She walked quickly, watching her step so as not to slip in the mud. Mud

covered everything: equipment, canvases, weapons, animals, people.

She thought that what would surprise her on Earth would be cold and exuberant —because it is ancient in the relics of its teleology — flora and fauna, all these visible and invisible monuments of thousands of years of human history and tens of thousands of years of the history of life — of which the Moon was deprived; that she will be surprised by the richness and power of the low elements, that she will have to fight the constant pressure of hydor; that she will finally be surprised by the Earthlings, people with a great variety of morphs. Indeed, they surprised her — but really, after these two years, she still couldn't get used to anything else: the mess. Mess, chaos, disharmony, ubiquitous disorder, carelessness, sloppiness, some temporariness and provisionality. She felt personally insulted by them.

Now walking through the Vistulian army camp, she had difficulty restraining herself from grimacing with contempt and disgust. This was supposed to be a model of soldierly discipline! The morph of the mighty Strategos! So what would the earthly army look like if left to its own devices, in the form of democracy or another perversion of power? The other side of this thought looked like this: what an army of itself subject to Harmony, a lunar army, would be capable of — what if Berbelek would embrace her with his strategos Form? There is no force that can stop Aurelia from participating in the Aether Battle.

The soldiers she passed saluted her politely; even the medics from the hospital bowed their heads before her. (The wounded and dying from the morning assault were being carried to the hospital). Everyone knew Aurelia Kurzos as a demiurgos of fire and adjutant of the Strategos, and her exotic appearance and eyebrow demorphs were enough to earn her the title of magician here in Vistulia.

Only Antidektes the Alexandrian knew the truth.

"Wait a moment!" the old sophistes called to her from the doorstep of his carriage.

She turned reluctantly.

"What?"

He waved his hand over her head, towards the Kolenica hill.

“A new recipe. Angular cyphers, prism numerology. Watch how the fire spreads despite the rains; The entire city will burn by tomorrow.“

She looked back at Kolenica. Above the uneven line of the walls, fat worms of smoke and ash spread across the pale blue, quickly crushed and driven away by the still strong wind.

“So far, they have managed to extinguish the fires” she muttered. ”Rumor has it that they have some kind of cloud demiurgos there.”

“That’s not the point. The talk about Trepiej’s rescue is getting louder and louder, do you think I can’t hear it? I have people“ he pointed with his head at his doulos and servants, two of them were Vistulian Gypsies, “who understand the local language.”

”Let there be one dry day. Do you know from what distance you can see the smoke of a burning city in the sky?“

“You started to get scared?” Aurelia spat, the mud hissing quietly at her feet. “The Horror will appear any moment now.”

“What if they don’t show up?”

“At night, the Strategos will lead a general assault.”

“Oh, beautiful! With my luck, he’ll somehow get hit in the first minute. Who will then ensure safe passage for me? — you know-where - Who?”

“Like me?” Aurelia huffed.

”You don’t honor your master’s oath?” Antidektes waved his thin arms. He was taller than Aurelia, and since he was standing on the steps of his houseboat, he towered over her by two pous. The girl tilted her head. He’ll wave again, she thought, and I’ll snatch his paws.

From the beginning, she did not like the deal Berbelek made with Antidektes. The Strategos needed the Aegyptian mainly to convince the rats of the doubting kratistoi that the Warlock was behind the Twist and the Adynatos in the celestial spheres. Aurelia still wasn’t sure whether the sophistes had been voicing these theories with full conviction or whether he had been paid to lie. — then he took to this form perfectly. Either way, the price was passage to the

Moon and free access to the libraries of the Fourth Labyrinth. Esthlos Berbelek gave him his word. Of course, a dead Esthlos Berbelek won't keep it — However, Antidektes would be left with Aurelia Kurzos, the Moon Girl, who will somehow have to return to her homeland...

"Listen, well" she began, taking a deeper breath to extinguish the internal fire, "The Strategos is alive and will live, and if you start spreading such defeatist messages —"

She stopped when she noticed that the sophistes was no longer listening to her. He stared at a point above her head — not to Kolenica, to something even higher, above the city and to the left of it. She looked back.

A spear of red stone came flying from the northwest, over the dark green mass of the forest. Aurelia narrowed her eyes. In parallel, a black aerostatic spindle stretched above the stone, silver lightning bolts surrounding its sides with a thorny ornament. A one-armed angel flexed above the prow dome of the minaret, the white bandages of its wings fluttering in the wind, the morning sun reflecting from a crystal scythe. Descending to the ground, the *Łamichmura* made a wide circle so as not to fly into the range of Kolenica's pyresider.

Aurelia grinned warmly at Antidektes. She didn't have to say anything, the soldiers had already noticed the "Łamichmur" and started shouting. The Vistulians were leaving their tents and looking at the sky. Even a trumpet played, Aurelia didn't know this signal. The Kolnican cannoners stopped firing for a moment, even if it was only symbolic.

The Oroneigean aerostat descended over the field behind the main camp of the Vistulian troops. It stopped about thirty pous above the ground. Swaying in the wind, it tried to maintain a steady position. The crew dropped the anchor chains. The soldiers ran to drive iron stakes into the ground. Aurelia followed them; she saw that people were also running here from the tents of the Strategos and hegemon Hauser Obol.

Meanwhile, dozens of men and women in the coal armor of The Horror were sliding down ropes lowered from the horizontal tower of the *Łamichmura*.

BREAK her neck, twist her head, as I would with a poisonous snake. The

nimrod turned nimrod's thoughts around in his head. I will kill the Viper, I will kill her. A colorful bird flew above him, the garden of Hieronim Berbelek's residence reminded Zajdar with its pleasant sounds of the cacophonous melodies of true wildness. Ihmet hated parks, gardens, city ponds and traveling bestiaries. The estate gate and guards disappeared around the bend in the avenue. He bared his teeth. Bite, bite, bite, bite! The sun rose high above Alexandria, and he squinted his right eye; the left pupil was safe in the shadow. He involuntarily quickened his pace. He knew she was present, Anais Panatakis' cousin told him.

The 'Hypotamia' entered the inner port of Alexandria on the seventh of Martius, two days late due to violent spring storms (Oroneia was once again turning winds against winds, clouds clashing against clouds, the Storm King taking a deep breath). Having rented a wiktyka in the port, Zajdar first went to the warehouses of Aneis Panatakis' trading post. In recent years, they have grown to sizes comparable to the size of the Company's African depots. Panatakis's warehouses were scattered along all the wharves, and the lion's share of trade between Herdon, northern Africa and western Asia now passed through his hands. Old Aneis still worked in his windowless office at the back of the oldest warehouse. However, due to the early hour and the fact that it was the day of some Kristian holiday (and Panatakis turned out to be also a Kristian), Ihmet did not find him there. So he left Berbelek's letters addressed to the factor and all other Alexandrian addressees, except Esthle Amitace and Esthle Alithea Latek in the office. Panatakis' people would deliver them as soon as possible. He then gave the victim the address of Berbelek's residence.

Sailing here — first on the *Bruta*, then on the *Hipotamia* of the African Company — he had time to think everything over. Contrary to appearances, it happens extremely rarely when a person really thinks about the shape of his life and looks at it as a whole — for a sculpture: it has feet and a head, but it only means something when seen as a whole — and evaluates them coldly, consciously chooses the target shape. Isn't this what ultimately distinguishes aristocrats, commoners and doulos? Provega's holy words: A slave is like an animal in that he has no control over his form; an aristocrat is like a god in that he defines it himself, he and no one else. Did Ihmet Zajdar have the right to call himself an aristocrat? He had no illusions here: he never even tried to overcome his nimrod nature, he went through life from one hunting fever to another, somehow incomplete and crippled when deprived of game on which he could focus and orient his days and nights according to it. Always though — that's how he saw himself, staring at the foamy waves of the Mediterranean Sea

— he was always the one who chose the game and the Hunt was his. Until he collapsed into the morph of Hieronim Berbelek. For now he was no longer sure of any of his choices, instincts or manners. The sculpture lost its symmetry and balance and tilted dangerously to one side. He noticed the change, if only by comparing the memory of his intentions. Three years ago, when he resigned from the Okeanic service, the path of his future life was simple and clear. He had enough money to spend those last few decades hunting however he wanted, wherever he wanted. In fact, he never made any concrete decision to abandon this plan and instead placed himself under the orders of Esthlos Berbelek. In fact, this is exactly what it looks like for almost all people. From day to day, from month to month, from year to year, from Form to Form, imposed from the mixture of external Forms, those of others... Until perhaps there will come a moment in old age, or even on our deathbed, when, looking back, we will see the finished shape of our lives and only this figure will surprise us: what a monstrosity, what a hoax, a lump of chaos and chance, without sense, without purpose, without meaning, without beauty.

Ihmet had no illusions that he himself would achieve some extraordinary harmony and kalokagatia here. But since he was closer to the end than the beginning, he could name the current shape and at least try to maintain some consistency. Consequence — this is the first requirement of every hunt and the first quality of every nimrod. Not aggression, not savagery, not violence — these are more befitting an ares. A nimrod, on the other hand, must stay on the chosen hunting path, often for years. Once preyed upon, the game cannot be abandoned in the field; this is unthinkable. In this sense, he is indeed a slave to his nature. One could say that he is most angry with his victims. Esthle Shulima Amitace had not betrayed for a second since their first meeting in the Vodenburg circus. Did the Strategos have anything to do with it? Zajdar sincerely doubted it. The blood was roaring in his veins, it was the voice of blood. He will kill her, he will kill the Viper.

The estate of Esthlos Hieronim Berbelek was located a dozen stadia east of the southern mouth of the Beleutsky Bridge, at the very end of the Parseid district of the palaces of the Alexandrian aristocracy. The Parseids stretched along the shores of Lake Mareothea for almost a third of their length. Further south began Upper Alexandria, the Ismaelite, Negrian, Gypsy, Pergamon, Indian and Dzung quarters. Berbelek's estate and house were hidden from their noises and smells in the dense greenery of the Mareotean parks. Land prices were very high here, and since the size of the garden was a prestige factor, the Strategos'

house was mostly built on oroneiges foundations, that is, in the air, above the blue waters of the lake. Zajdar has already visited him twice. During his first visit, the building was not yet finished, the garden had not been reshaped, and the high fence was not closed on all sides. However, a year had passed and the property looked like one of the better-kept ones. Berbelek himself managed to stay there for about a month. However, the fact that Esthle Shulima Amitace was a permanent resident here was probably important for its current shape.

Zajdar found the Parseids extremely well guarded. As in times of war, its streets were patrolled by mounted (zebra and unicorn) patrols, and the Hypatia posted her own guards at the gates and along the walls, hedges and fences; Nebuchadnezzar's Crocodiles stood at the border crossings. From the bridge, the nimrod also spotted military boats circling the eastern bays of the lake. However, Berbelek's Mamluks recognized him and that was enough for Hypatia's guards. He announced to the guards the imminent arrival of the port's doulos with his luggage, paid the wiktyka and entered the gate of the estate.

The house was low, one-story, its roofs were initially obscured by the greenery of the garden. Only when Ihmet turned twice into the driveway in front of the stables did he see the front of the building — or rather its lower, above-ground part, a kind of fauces, a marble anchor on the shore of Mareot. From this foundation, arches of sun-heated stone rose over the lake and hidden stairs led to spacious corridors and rooms, suspended on blocks of red oroneiges above the waters of the bay covered with reeds and helophyte flowers. Some of these rooms, as Zajdar remembered, had floors made of thick Vodenburg glass, in others there were deliberately left narrow gaps and round openings, the "basements" of the house went down to the very level of the warm waves, and all this underground-earth-water architecture.

"You're back!"

"Hello, hello to our black Artemis!"

They hugged.

Zueia took a step back to get a better look at Ihmet.

"You still smell of the sea. The beard - you could finally shave!"

"I wouldn't recognize myself in the mirror."

“But! That twinkle in his eye — some new hunt — Say — what did you shoot?”

“Well, well, well, does the mistress allow you to attack guests like that? An old man’s heart may not stand it. But let me take a look at you! Every year she gets younger and more dangerous. What have you done to your hair?

“Seventy-seven braids. Homemade doulos will pay me. This form came this year from Hurat. Don’t like it?“

”Turn around.”

“I tried to persuade Esthle Amitace. Esthle Latek, in turn, was persuaded by her -“

She fell with a broken neck. The nimrod kicked her lightly in the temple just to make sure, and her skull cracked open like a young coconut, spilling out juices.

He looked around again — no one in sight, nothing moves in the windows of the palace, no one passes through the courtyard. Muffled voices and the neighing of anxious horses come from inside the stable (did they smell the blood?), but the gate was closed. He took the body under his arms and dragged it into the nearest bushes. He came back and covered the red stain with sand. After checking his shoes and trouser legs (they were clean), he looked around a third time. Nobody, nothing, nobody.

In the main hall hanging on the shore of the lake, he came across the seneschal of Berbelek’s house. The seneschal called a servant to take Zajdar to Esthle Amitace. They walked through wide, bright corridors, filled with the smell and sounds of the lake. The tiny scales of the floor and wall mosaics glittered dazzlingly; the windows were wide open, African air, heat and angelic brightness flowed through them in golden clouds. Ihmet grew younger with every step. Lighter, faster, stronger, less deadly.

Esthle Shulima Amitace was found in a water peristyle, descending in four increasingly longer terraces to the very level of the lake; More than a dozen doors from the palace’s rear rooms opened onto the highest terrace. The peristyle was surrounded by hydor trees, morphed from ferns, figs, and palms, some of them tall enough to cast a deep shadow over the marble. Ibis and flamingo feathers

twinkled among the trees; Esthle Amitace were sitting at the hievo table on the right side of the second terrace. She was bent over, writing something furiously, and the nimrod saw only her tanned back and flowing golden hair. On her knees, on the white linen of her long skirt, a young lioness had laid her head. Shulima stroked it mechanically with her left hand.

"The Esthle..." began the servant.

The nimrod drove his occipital bone into his brain.

He ran towards the Moon Girl. He didn't take any weapons with him — he didn't know where and in what situation he would find Shulima — but since when did he need a gun? He bit his tongue to taste the blood. Hunting! The world yielded to his lust.

The lioness rose to her feet and revealed her fangs. He jumped down to the second terrace. She lunged at him with a dull growl. He knelt down, struck the wedge of his hand upwards, diagonally. She was entered like clay, her body offered no resistance to the Hunter. He ripped a coil of hot intestines from the lioness. He threw the animal onto the marble, grabbed it by the skin on its back, raaaaarrrgh, foaming at the mouth, three-four-five, smashed its head. She was still fluttering in postmortem convulsions, her tail clapping against the wet terrace slab.

The nimrod turned to the woman. She stood leaning against the table top, wide green eyes staring at the bloody nimrod, a grimace of inhuman ferocity on his face. She didn't run away, she also suppressed her defensive reflex and placed her arms loosely along her body. Only her breasts rose and fell in the rhythm of panicked breathing — of course she was terrified, they always are.

He moved towards her.

"No!" she screamed.

He might scream now even if he did —

Behind his back — bare feet on the stone — closer. He jumped back.

The blow pierced the air. Back! Who? He knows him, He never forgets a face, he is Esthlos David Monshebe of Thebes, fiancé of Esthle Alithea Latek, ares. Ares! Oh, Manat.

They clashed at the threshold of the terrace — a second, two, no more. The nimrod kicked the ares in the shin, breaking his leg, the exposed bone shooting out white needles all around. The ares reached for Zajdar's head and ripped off half his face. The nimrod's fist grazed the young man's right shoulder, and his arm popped out of its socket. The ares thrust his open hand into the Persian's chest, the sternum and ribs shattered into a thousand pieces, shredding Zaydar's lungs and piercing his heart. Going against this movement, the nimrod hooked his left thumb into Monshebe's neck, tearing out the larynx and artery, tendons and muscles.

They fell on the cold marble.

Nimrod didn't feel the cold, didn't feel his body; the pain always came later — will it arrive at all? Blood was sticking to his eyelids, he couldn't see anything out of his left eye, the world was drifting away from him in the bright dawn of the morning, the sun and greenery and water and blue sky, and the face of Esthle Amitace leaning over him.

"He wasn't supposed to be here, he wasn't supposed to be here, oh Mother, I can't bear it again, couldn't Hieronim have sent you earlier?!"

Nobody sent me. What are you talking about? You should. Oh no. Disappointment. She doesn't have any. She was waiting for you. Yet. It hurts.

FIRE is not similar to any other element, Fire is different in its nature from all other Matter. It is the only one who creates itself: from a flame a flame, from a spark a fire. It is the only one created by the use of force. It is the only one who can be created at all; other elements are impossible — and Fire, yes, there are many methods. Other Matter exists on its own, independent, but Fire always needs some substrate, fuel, a carrier. *Generally speaking* — wrote Theophrastus of Lesbos — *everything that burns is always in the process of being created, just like movement, and therefore, even when it is created, it somehow destroys itself when there is a lack of fuel and perishes itself.* If Motion were an element, it would have the form of Fire in Matter.

However, Aurelia feels that in fact Movement is an element — and she puts herself under its control, locks herself in its morph. Breastplate, okostraps okohelm, vortex gauntlet — subsequent elements of the armor, like the organs

of a living clock, soon the rotation of its gears will match the rhythm of her heartbeat, soon they will join together in one harmony.

Hot, vibrating, and resonating with mekanic energy, she came out in front of the tent. There was intense pre-assault fire, one of the pyresiders thundered every now and then, and the keraunet fire continued uninterrupted. Aurelia bent her knees, the epicycles around her legs and around her shoulders were covered in huge masses of mud, for a moment she felt like a golem, a djinn, an Iganazi — but she immediately changed her morph, the openwork gears of her armor clicked, and the momentum added by her eternal movement extended Aurelia's jump twenty times, sending her — a fiery comet — over half of the camp, to the forest slope opposite the demolished Kolenica gate.

Here a hundred of The Horror's soldiers were preparing for battle; lower down the slope, the demiurgoi of the morphzoons were slowly bringing the sleepy behemoths into line.

Aurelia landed on her knees, sinking into the soft earth — fountains of mud flew in all directions, and curses from the splashed soldiers rang out.

She straightened up. In the twilight of the premature twilight, the aetheric armor appeared as a silver-pink cloud, a patch of heavenly light split around the woman's figure by a vibrating prism. Only at the bottom, around her feet, calves and knees, where the whirlpools swelled black with absorbed ge and hydor, only there was the true nature of the armor revealed to the eyes of the Earthlings, or rather its movement, the nature of movement, the harmony of the sixth element, the power of momentum. Aether-mud swarms cut through clay, grass, and stone equally.

There was, of course, confusion. Spreading apart, The Horror's soldiers aimed keraunets and slashers at Aurelia.

A tall, bearded man with a centurion's engraving on his charcoal breastplate stepped towards her.

"Who are you?"

Then she felt a sudden urge to tell them the truth — O Moon, O Lady, that indeed they serve the Strategos of the Labyrinth — however, the hegemon Obol appeared in time and the temptation disappeared.

“The Strategos is calling you“ he growled at Aurelia.

He couldn’t see the expression on her face, blurred by the quick circles of her helmet. She nodded.

Esthlos Berbelek had already mounted his horse, a tall albino humiya. From his saddle he observed the Koleńica Hill through binoculars. Aurelia noticed that he wore only light armor, his helmet hanging from his saddle.

Next to him, on a powerful horse, sat a herald with the shaft of an unfurled banner in his hand (the lower end resting on the stirrup). Contrary to Aurelia’s hopes, there was nothing like the Moon’s banner, but the Spur: A Red Locust.

“I know you’re tempted” the Strategos said.

Aurelia bowed her head.

“Kyrios.”

”I may have to disappoint you even more. They know the Horror has arrived, but they don’t know in what numbers. Look. They haven’t fired for fifteen minutes.”

She cursed.

He laughed heartily.

“What will it be then? Will you put the armor back in the shuttle?“

“Give the order to attack.”

Lowering his binoculars, he winked slyly at her and straightened up in the saddle — and he actually raised his hand.

The trumpet played.

Immediately Janna-z-Gniezno approached them, followed by Captain Polański and the centurion of the Vistulian infantry.

”North wall” Janna gasped. “A dozen or so Muscovites tried to escape through the northern wall, they wanted to surrender. Let me be struck with leprosy! Do you think something happened to Krypier?“

Throwpppp! — another cauldron of Antidektes' potion soared over the city. A fountain of flames fell on the already burning roofs. Aurelia looked at the panorama of Kolenica and the fields around Kolenica. Only movement caught her attention; what was still did not exist. She glanced blindly at the tightly built city and its jagged walls — no one was shooting from there anymore, she didn't see any activity.

The Horror's centurion whistle blew three times. They were ready. The Strategos reined in the white humiya, the herald dug his heels into the beast's flanks, and Janna cursed solemnly. In the roar of behemoths, in the constant thunder of pyresiders and keraunets, in the neighing of horses, in the crunch of the coal armor of The Horror‘s men — the last assault was beginning.

She looked right and left: a straight line of Horror warriors, stretched out as if on parade. Identically dressed, with identical movements, even identical height — only every tenth one was taller. Once, twice, again, embraced by one morph, they walked in an inhumanly even rhythm — even the Moon shuddered. This was not about a regular assault on the city walls, striking a breach, such a formation would make no sense — it was all about intimidating the defenders.

The Horror derived its traditions directly from the laws and customs of Lakadaemon. Directly, that is, in uninterrupted succession: was almost two thousand years old. Rather than tradition, however, we have to talk about a certain kind of life: continually exchanging the Matter of which it was composed, the Horror retained the same Form for ages and ages — A form of an invincible mercenary army. In fact, it has already been defeated many times (in unfavorable conditions or in a hopeless balance of forces), but the morph survived. Some soldiers died, new ones enlisted, of various languages, denominations and nationalities, from under the anthos of various kratistoi — but The Horror, his teknitoi somas and psyche, his strategos and ares, his hegemons and leonidas, slowly and inexorably kneaded all the soldiers into one shape. The details of this shape changed over time, because the background and methods of warfare changed, but the core remained the same. Everyone in The Horror started at the lowest level, and even his highest commanders were subject to the command of the Form itself. It included, among other things, absolute discipline, a Lakadeamian rigor of diet and exercise, and fidelity to the commitments made. History has recorded cases of individual soldiers deviating, but never betraying — A Horror as The Horror. They remained faithful to him with the strength of Lakadaemonian patriotism, but covering the Form, not the country.

The Horror accepted both short- and long-term contracts. After the end of the Kratistos Wars, Rome, temporarily removed from the protection of any Kratistos, concluded the so-called Eternal Agreement, under which The Horror was henceforth to constitute a complement and counterweight to the politically entangled Legions; it has been to this day. The contracts were concluded by individual Horror Columns — eleven European, seven African, seven Asian — never together, so that no single disaster can cause destruction to the entire formation. The columns did not always operate on their own territory: half of the Axumean Horror had been stationed in the British Isles for several decades. They also did not always have a clause in their contracts allowing them, under certain conditions (for example, the absence of a conflict), to enter the service of a sovereign offering a higher pay. Even if — this often involved a notice period of several months or several years.

Strategos Berbelek rented every Horror that was currently available for rent. Gradually, over the next thirteen years, several tens of thousands of selected troops will be under his command. Only he didn't have thirteen years. He counted each passing day with frustration.

Kolenica must fall today.

A behemoth must have died today. They passed the last line of trenches, the behemoths covering the path to the gate. If this was some kind of trick on the part of Krypier Cudzybrat, now the town's pyresiders should have spoken up. Nothing. They kept going. Aurelia moved in long strides alongside the white humiya (flames roared loudly behind her, red banners). She kept her eyes on the Strategos. He smiled crookedly under his breath.

Temple bells rang in Kolenica. First one, then a second and a third followed; soon they were all beating, it must have been planned in advance.

The behemoths reached the embankment under the gate, a double row of gigantic bodies covering the infantry's safe approach to the walls. The Vistulian soldiers from the bridgehead beyond the gate leaned out from behind the wall and the ruins of the wall and began to give some signs to the Strategos approaching at gallop, and shouted something. Of course, amid all the noise, their words were indistinguishable.

At that moment, Aurelia looked up and noticed a movement on the battlements, behind the fourth tower, the southeast tower.

She pointed them out to Berbelek with her hand, fire and movement.

“They surrender!”

Kolenica had raised a white flag.

The Vistulian army broke into a joyful uproar. The Strategos raised his right hand and the trumpeter gave a long signal to Gotól!, and the centurion of Horror blew a long whistle. This could also have been a trick. They kept going.

Hieronim Berbelek entered Kolenica preceded by two of the largest behemoths, which, having completely destroyed the southern gate of the city and the surrounding wall, immediately started trampling on the high street barricades.

There could have been a hundred Muscovites with keraunets hiding behind the windows and on the roofs of the surrounding buildings. The Strategos did not dismount, he did not hide behind the Vistulian barricade, anyone could easily shoot him, on a white humiya, in a shiny breastplate, with a bare head and uncovered face, under the family banner, he was visible and recognizable from a distance.

Nobody shot.

Seoc Nogach, an old centurion of the Gaelic infantry, ran from the side barricade that had survived the behemoths’ passage.

“They aren’t here, Esthlos. They withdrew several minutes ago, all of them. There were grapeshot machines there — nothing, they took it with them. Look, Esthlos!”

To the left, from the depths of the next block, a riding horse ran in full file, with a white sheet tied to its pommel. Shod hooves beat hard on the pavement. He neighed, spun around, and ran back, the sheet trailing behind him like a train.

The Strategos dismounted from the humiya. He nodded to Obol and Janna.

“Enter on foot quarter by quarter. First the walls and towers— Seoc will lead. The Horror is behind me. Stop firing. Someone stop these Sheol bell ringers! Let’s go.“

There wasn't a soul on the streets. Clouds of smoke from the burning districts (northwest, west) floated in the still air suddenly the sky like a cemetery ghost; and they were going more or less in that direction, under the carpet of ash, towards the fire. Aurelia moved half a step ahead of the Strategos. In this emptiness and stillness, in the heavy evening shadows, in the stench of the earthly city — she read dozens of vague threats, obvious and only felt threats, for herself and for him. It wasn't a war anymore, it was something else, something more, that's not how you act in war.

She remembered one of her father's favorite sayings: "It's not enough for me to win. My enemies have yet to lose."

Strategos Berbelek walked slowly (behind him were the black ranks of Horror, bristling with double and triple barrels and crooked blades), looking from side to side, stopping at every intersection. Holding the binoculars in his left hand, he tapped the high boots of the cavalry jugras. He looked curiously at the perspective of the passing blocks. He must have remembered these streets well. He smiled ironically.

The Market. Or at least the square towards which the streets converge. In the middle there are two wells with low walls. Above all, though — People. For the first time they met live defenders of Kolenica.

These were not the people of Kolenica themselves, but soldiers from the Urals and Moscow: a dozen or so armed men sitting on the wall pillars and standing around them. More soldiers stood at the back, in two narrow streets — a few on horses, all with weapons in their hands. Aurelia was looking for Ashawillo's banner. The situation was strange to say the least, they all seemed to be waiting for something. Were they really waiting for Berbelek's arrival?

Then he will wonder many times: what was actually going on here? What happened in Kolenica before Berbelek and his army entered, that when they entered, they found the situation they did, this silent, motionless theater around the well and the soldiers ready to flee, crowded in the northern streets? What did they say to each other, what did they think, what did they do? — before a curtain of terrified silence fell?

Then — for then Aurelia jumped in front of the Strategos without thinking, covering him in a whirlwind of fire. The Horror spread in both directions, flowing into the market square under the walls of the buildings, rushing into them

through windows and doors, the first shots and screams of the wounded and killed were heard, the crash of destroyed furniture, the coal warriors penetrated deeper and deeper, taking over one house after another, another floor.

The Strategos didn't wait for anything, he went towards the wells. The Muscovites gathered there jumped to their feet — seven men, two women — still without a word or any gesture of explanation, eyes darting, blurred expressions, uncoordinated movements, the bald Ural man reached for the keraunet leaning against the wall. — Aurelia jumped with a swing of her hips, fell on him in a cloud of red heat, the Ural man's cloak burst into flames even before she ripped the man with her right vortex gauntlet along the spine, and the raised orbit of the uranoysis of the left whiplash decapitated him.

They ran in all directions, tripping over other people's and their own feet. Aurelia broke the keraunettes left behind.

"You!" Berbelek roared.

She looked back.

He pointed to one of the fleeing men, a tall brunette in armor decorated with phoenix feathers; he ran away at a run, without taking his eyes off Berbelek, walking rather than running, step by step — now he stood frozen in his tracks.

"You!" Berbelek roared again, and even Aurelia felt fear. She approached the Strategos slowly, armor calm and flame cool. She stood at the back, on the right.

"Krypier!" Berbelek hissed and pointed with his gauntleted right hand to the ash-covered pavement at his feet.

Cudzybrat stepped forward, left foot, right foot, once and twice — the Strategos didn't lower his eyes, he didn't lower his hand — closer and closer, his lips were trembling, he wanted to look away from Berbelek's face, but he couldn't, so he just clenched his fists and shook more and more, after the last step he almost staggered, as if the last of his strength had left him, and he fell to his knees in front of Berbelek, with a long, animal moan, hugging him by the legs and pressing his head to them, lower, even lower, until finally he was kissing, licking, drooling on Berbelek's muddy shoes, and Berbelek was looking down at him in strange thought, Aurelia did not understand what this light a grimace,

an ironic curl of the lips, a smile, not a smile, what does he feel when he pats Krypier Cudzybrat on the head and murmurs soothingly to him:

"It's okay, it's okay, yeah, I know, Krypier, I know, it won't take long, it won't hurt, now, now, now."

That night, for the first time, it didn't rain. Krypier Cudzybrat burned until dawn.

Σ

Ferus, Aereus, Aethereus

THE "Łamichmur" moored to the Ostrog barbican at night, and the household members were woken up by barking dogs. Aurelia was sleeping soundly on the deck of the Oroneiges aerostat, the moonlit night had just begun for her, her body demanded rest, body and mind, several hundred hours of monthly lethargy. Finally, she was woken up by force, as the Strategos was sending the *Łamichmura* on another mission and all the passengers had to be transferred to the Ostrog manor. It was then that she saw the Berbelek-z-Ostrog family estate for the first time.

She saw the forests. The stone barbican, connected by an aerial bridge to the remains of a defensive wall, faced southeast, because this is where the road leading from the river and ponds approached the top of the hill, where there used to be a gate and towers protecting it. Now, of all these crude fortifications, only the barbican remained, and to it the rope gangways and iron anchors of *Łamichmura* were attached. In the drift he always turned like an angel against the wind. Aurelia woke up after four o'clock, it was blowing from the east, so when she descended from the starboard side to the top of the barbican, she saw an endless panorama of the forest stretching to the southern horizon, to a barely visible, misty line of mountains. At this time of day the sun discolored everything, putting a honeyed glow on green, green and green — Aurelia stood above a sea of green. Sleepy and yawning, she allowed herself to be led up the inner stairs of the barbican, through the courtyard of the manor house and to the first floor of its western wing, where, without a word, she fell into the bed

linen fragrant with the spring of the Earth and fell back into her fiery sleep.

Once again, she woke up in the middle of the night, the pain of a full bladder jolted her from the bed, for a moment she didn't know where she was, what kind of ice prison it was, and only when she touched the cold brick wall did she remember Berbelek, Earth and Ostrog. She went out into the dark corridor. She bit her tongue, her skin itched, and in the dim light of her own sweat she found stairs and a door leading to the back yard, where a semi-wild orchard and a low forest floor began. There were probably bathrooms and a sanitarium in the manor, but she wasn't going to look for them. She crouched behind a short willow tree. The urine, red with dust, burned the grass and a pungent stench arose. Returning through the yard, she noticed a dark silhouette on a bench against the wall of the manor house. She stopped, clenched her fists, it became brighter. An old woman was sitting on a bench, wrapped in a colorful shawl; a coral comb shone in her gray hair. She looked at Aurelia, narrowing her eyes. Now she moved, smoothing her black skirt with her left hand, beckoning to the Moonlight with her right; a ring with a blue stone flashed.

Aurelia approached slowly.

The woman nodded a second time and Aurelia knelt down at the bench; now the old woman could look at her without raising her head. She ran her cold, bony fingers over Aurelia's cheek, over her hairless skull, back over her cheek, neck, collarbone, chest, shoulder. Somewhere deep in the forest a wolf howled. The woman smiled warmly; Aurelia smiled back.

The old woman dismissed her with a shake of her head.

"Behind the stairs, white door, red frame" she said in Greek when Aurelia's back was already turned to her. Her voice was soft and resonant, almost girlish.

Aurelia woke up for the third time in Ostrog at breakfast time — the smells of hot dishes filled the manor as much as the rays of the morning sun, saliva pooled in her mouth as she barely left the sanitarium room behind the stairs. She returned to the bedroom to put on some clothes. It turned out that while she was sleeping, all her clothes had been taken away, even her shoes and the cavalry jacket she had won from a Hurat centurion. All that was left was the aetheric armor sealed in a swinging box. In the trunk under the bed, she found a dozen skirts and dresses, some of them very expensive in appearance, a cape, a fur vest, sandals and leather boots. She will probably never have the opportunity

to wear something like this again — and she still had that childlike curiosity, the desire to personally experience everything different — so she put on a light yellow dress of Herdonian cut, with a high collar, long sleeves, covering her breasts and tight at the waist. She rolled up her sleeves past her elbows and went down to the dining room.

King Casimir IV had breakfast there.

"Kyrios."

"Get up, Aurelia, get up." Strategos Berbelek sat at the king's right hand.

The king had no regalia, he was wearing a simple white shirt, but she knew it was Kazimir, she knew his face from engravings in Vistulian and Gothic newspapers; and she knew the monarch's morph.

"From the moon, right?" muttered the king, putting down his forks.

"Come, come" the Strategos waved at her.

"Kyrios."

She blinked, still drowsy, half lost in a hot sleep— it was actually night. What conversation did she interrupt? As she was going down, she heard voices, but she didn't understand Vistulian. Apart from the two of them, Antidektes and a gloomy bearded man with a bureaucrat's chain on his chest were sitting at a high oak table. Behind their chairs stood servants in Vistulian colors.

The king looked at her intently, folding his arms on his chest, pursing his fleshy lips.

"They tell me you live like salamanders there. Can you breathe fire?"

The bureaucrat leaned towards Kazimir.

"Esthlos..."

"What?" growled the king. "I'd like to know what I'm putting my head down for. This captain, Polanski, if he wrote the truth in his reports — after all, Illeia didn't send her here without a purpose, people are already starting to talk, they don't know anything yet, but they are already talking about Południca and the Ashen Maid, that half of Kolenica burned down because of her breath and the

like — so if Illeia can drop an army of these here — well, how about them?"

"Hyppyroi."

"Hyppyroi." Kazimir took a scarf from his sleeve and blew his nose. "Or maybe? Tell me — Who are you?"

"Ryter Aurelia Kruzos, kyrios."

"Because Hieronim tells me all sorts of scary tales, but for now I have the Warlock at my side, and Illeia, oh, in the sky."

"She has poisoned the sky" muttered Antidektes, adding his two cents.

Aurelia looked at the Strategos. Esthlos Berbelek shrugged.

"If she wanted, you would all be lying at her feet long ago" she said.

"Kyrios" she bowed her head.

The king and the bureaucrat exchanged a few words in Vistul; the Strategos got involved. After a while, Kazimir was pounding his fist on the table, making the silver tableware jump. The servants moved back to the walls. Even the sophistes stopped eating. Suddenly the Strategos laughed and placed his hand on the king's shoulder. Aurelia held her breath. The king turned to Berbelek and began to explain something to him quietly. Esthlos Berbelek nodded. Aurelia was backing towards the door. The king blew his nose again. The Strategos scattered salt on the oak countertop and began to draw something in it with the tip of a knife. Casimir IV looked on with an expression as gloomy as that of a court bureaucrat. Aurelia left, her bare feet making no sound on the old parquet floors.

Janna caught up with her in the corridor.

"Was she there for something?" she hissed, dragging Aurelia by her elbow back towards the west wing. Only now did Aurelia notice soldiers in royal colors positioned at the stairs, at the door and in the hall, also visible in the yard. She only glimpsed the charcoal black of The Horror move once or twice; The Strategos only took ten of Obol's Hausers with him in The "Łamichmur". They passed a row of indoor shooting ranges. In the courtyard of the manor, in the shadow of the ruins of the fortress walls, stood the high carriages of the royal

entourage.

"Why did you dress up like that? They must have mistaken you for God knows who to let you in at all. You were supposed to sleep, right? You're sleeping now."

"Where are the kitchens?"

"Wait, I'll send for something hot in a moment."

But she was there for something! —Janna couldn't process it; screaming, she nervously tugged at the bandage on her left eye socket.

"What did you tell them? You could have ruined everything!"

"What are you talking about?"

In the sunny courtyard, between the carts, dogs, purebred and non-breeding, mongrel mongrels, with their tongues hanging out, a whole herd, were running, raising clouds of dust and bursting into furious clamor every now and then. — but that was really the only movement. The soldiers lying in the shadows were sleeping or seemed to be sleeping. In the still air, the trees stood still, their branches hanging. Just a little movement in the sky — Aurelia raised her head — a stork was circling over the barbican. They sat down at a stone table under a spreading oak tree.

A maid caught on the way by Janna brought a jug of milk and honey, a loaf of bread, a bowl full of cold meats, another with steaming goulash, and a third with fish soup.

"What would you spoil, what would you spoil" Janna grumbled, cutting the bread furiously. "You are the best proof and you don't even realize it. Hey, are you even conscious?"

"Sorry, my eyes are watery."

"My God, what a child you are..."

Aurelia snorted dry smoke. Soot fell on the cheese and eggs that had just been delivered. Janna-z-Gniezno slowly wiped it off with her thumb, which she then rubbed against the sleeve of her blouse, one, two, three — horizontal lines of black.

"Child, Child, Child. I don't know what role he has assigned you, but you can spoil more with your ignorance, so — eat, why don't you eat — so at least I'll warn you in the future."

"Mhm, before what? Where did he even come from? The King of Vistulia. I didn't know we were going to Ostrog to meet him; Esthlos Berbelek was to appear at home. The Strategos still has some family here, doesn't he?"

"Why do you think he needed this victory in Kolenica?"

"To convince Kazimir. He will give him an army, they will go with Thor to the Warlock. No? Well, that's why."

"Try to think like a strategos. Try to think like a kratistos."

"What for? I am not on of them."

"So take my word for it: you could have ruined everything."

"The king agreed."

"What?"

"Kazimir agreed to everything. Or at least he will. Certainly. Give me this one — thank you. He will, Esthlos Berbelek has already straightened him out.

"Ah. Yes. He straightened him out. There you go."

"Were you in doubt? He will defeat the Warlock, he will defeat the Adynatos."

Janna began to cackle, shaking and turning her head until her gray braid wrapped around her neck.

Aurelia finished her soup and loosened the ribbons of her Herdonian dress.

"You are laughing."

"Do you really think that these are Hieronim's plans? — After all, he is gathering armies and allies, organizing an offensive, colluding with the kratistoi against the Adynatos, I witnessed it — Think, fool: from this his power grows, such a morph has opened up to him — that even Illeia pays him in advance for any army he wishes. Hieronim would be an idiot if he did not accept it; and he

would be a complete idiot if he rejected it all immediately afterwards.“

”Hhmmm, so, as you say, the plan is: to get the most out of the Lady, to gain the best position possible and to hold it at all costs. The rest are mere lies, abandoned as they wear out.”

“Not everyone seeks only a glorious death on the battlefield. There are knights and there are those who send them into battle.“

“No,” replied Aurelia. “There are knights and there are those whom knights follow into battle. This Hieronim Berbelek, of whom you speak — who would he have carried with him, where did he draw his strength from, how did he win? What would King Kazimir have to bow to? There is no strength in a Form based on lies. Why did he conquer Kolenica, why did Cudzybrat surrender? The revenge was real, the hatred was real.”

Janna poured honey on her bread and now licked her sticky fingers.

“The great teknitoi psyche have been deceiving you so far, girl” she smacked her lips with pity.

“Oh, I believe that this is what you consider to be true!” Now Aurelia laughed, her eyes sparkling. “Perhaps Esthlos Berbelek consciously allowed you to think so. Why not? The deception is in you. Ask Antidektes what the most terrible diseases consist of — leprosy, putrefaction, smallpox, cancer — where they come from in people. They will not appear in a man of strong Form. It is the soma that reflects the rupture of the morph and the inner madness, tissues rebel against tissues. That’s how the body lies. Because — pull back that eyepatch, show yourself to me. Come on! You can afford it, why didn’t you hire a teknites soma? Maybe no one can do anything about such a crooked Form? What? The lie is in you.”

Janna threw scraps of sausage to the dogs, they ran under the oak from the entire courtyard, bit each other and pushed each other at her feet, the more aggressive ones she dug out further from the stone bench — but she continued to feed them.

”No, no, no. A hot temper; or maybe Świątowid has already touched you, like that old woman?” She squinted in the sun, which was already starting to peek under the branches of the tree, and a hundred new wrinkles appeared on

her face. "Old Janna and young Aurelia. Who is right? The gods roll dice. The gods do not roll dice. We will soon find out, when Hieronim has to choose, to act this way or that way. So how much? How much will you bet?"

"Are you offering me a bet?"

"Ha"

"I don't want money."

"I know. A single order."

"What?"

"Anything."

"No. I have sworn oaths."

"So nothing against your oaths."

Aurelia wiped her mouth.

"Good. And you — one order."

"One order."

"I will banish you to Herdon, to the Land of Gaudat."

"Yes, yes, definitely." Janna smiled crookedly. Throwing the last piece of sausage to the dogs, she looked up. Aurelia yawned widely.

"Are you that bored?"

"I have to go back to bed, I'll fall head over heels on my face. Good night."

After waking up for the fourth time, she woke up for good. The king and his men had already left and the Ostrog court seemed empty. How many people actually live here permanently? After the Strategos and the Strategos' men leave, — only this silence and emptiness will remain, and the green light of the forest. For Aurelia woke up at that quietest hour just after dawn and walked through empty corridors and high halls with walls made of ancient wood (the ground floor of the main part of the building was built exclusively of wood, on foundations made of stones black with age). The air was shimmering and trem-

bling with the spring sun, bursting through every window, embrasure, crack, but when Aurelia descended into the shadow of those walls that remembered Świątowid's birth and first death, she was embraced by a coldness that was almost tangible, a rough material of cold, a shroud of dark moisture, her breath evaporated from her lips and immediately condensed in that steam. Yes, according to the words of Antidektes the Alexandrian, aerial cyphers turn into hydral cyphers, hot and moist arches into cold and moist arches, because even self-elements are born and die.

From the hall hung with the heads of wilderness beasts. She went out into the courtyard — into the swirling clouds of awakened insects, into the hot glow — into the orchard, into the forest. The path marked with runes burned into the bark led straight down to the spur fishponds. The water surfaces overgrown with green fur seemed like flat clearings stretched between the compact rows of trees. A shaggy-haired peasant was lazily spinning a knotty pole in one of the ponds. At the sight of Aurelia, he opened his mouth, froze in mid-motion, almost falling into the dark depths after the pole had been released. Aurelia retreated into the forest. These trees — everything that grows here grows wild, even what is planted and cultivated by man, apple trees, wheat, onions: half-wild, breaking free, towards ancient, pre-human, purposeless forms. Here, in the deep anthos of Świątowid.

Barely a few dozen steps later, when the light of the clearing disappeared between the trunks, she lost her bearings completely. She walked as she was led by the slopes of the earth, the tangled root systems, the labyrinths of thicker, thinner undergrowth. She could no longer avoid the touch of the forest, she was pushing through the damp greenery, cobwebs stuck to her skin, weeds wrapped around her feet. It was all so cold and wet... Earth, she was on Earth, in a world of mud and chaos. The same morph was reflected in the world beyond Świątowid's aura — mud and chaos, in bodies and minds. People who were somehow half-baked, underformed, tossed between morph and morph, without straight lines and sharp edges, were constantly trying to reconcile truth with lies. Were we all like this once, or did we come from there, did you extract us from there? Was the universe born from a Lie...? It strives for perfection, gradually replacing the unbelievable with the credible, the untrue with the true. Evolutions and changes will end at the moment of reaching the Truth, which can only be one, unchanging. In the meantime, we live in a Lie, we live a Lie, we live because we Lie.

She stumbled over angular stones. A hill paved with flat boulders opened between mossy trunks. In its center — she approached, leaned over — the largest boulder was placed, hewn into a prism with smooth sides. Now, of course, also overgrown with moss. The prism was three meters high, but half of it was hidden by a pile of rubbish piled around it. She spread them with her foot — some bones, skulls — she crouched — all identical in shape, beetles and centipedes scurrying through empty eye sockets and under mandibles as she crushed the remains — not human, these skulls are long, narrow, with low, flat foreheads and predatory fangs — wolves? Foxes? Dogs? Some already rotten, and some, those on top, surprisingly fresh, still with bloody discolorations, not fully cleaned by vermin. Who brings them here and for what purpose? She removed them from under the boulder, struck it with her open hand, then wiped off the burnt stain. As she suspected, an inscription had been carved here. She did not recognize the Vistuli words, although the alphabet was Latin. Only one caught her eye: BERBELEK. It's a grave, she was standing on a grave. She found Arabic numerals: 1161 1179. Someone of the Strategos' blood. She looked for names in the immediate vicinity of the surname. NADIJA. REGINA. SLUVA. Or maybe just Vistuli words that she didn't understand. The Strategos never mentioned anyone like that. Maybe another branch of the family? But does he have any other family at all?

Several paths led from the grave, she chose the one that seemed the most trodden at first glance. After a dozen or so minutes, she came out onto the river bank. The muddy slope descended steeply towards the murky, yellow water. The path led to the right, where a stadium, further on the bank fell away to a wide ford, opening on the other side of the river into an oval clearing with several dozen wooden cottages. One of the villages of Ostrog, the Berbelek fiefdom. The Chimneys were already smoking, people were bustling about among the buildings. Aurelia went higher into the trees and sat on a fallen tree trunk, half-hidden by the undergrowth. From here she could safely observe life on Earth. This was often her main and only occupation, as she traveled with the Strategos by land, sea and air across half the globe - she would retreat into the shadows and watch, listen. She had nothing else to do for whole days and nights. Even if she wanted to talk - no one would understand her; no one understood her, not even among those who knew Greek.

Because she was not allowed to see Esthlos Berbelek in Ostrog. However, through the Porte she learned that they were only waiting for the return of the "Breaking Cloud", the Strategos had arranged further meetings - also with

kings? Haser Obol was mumbling about a mass transfer of two Columns of African Horror to the borders of Babylon. Was the Strategos really preparing for a frontal attack on the Seven-Fingers? Without the support of Aegypt, without the support of Ephrem's Ishmaelites and the princes of Indus, without an alliance with Macedonia? Or maybe he already received such support? He will have to carry out this attack from someone's lands. From whose? Was he counting on Nebuchadnezzar's submission? And now, when the Hypatia is holding Lakatoia captive?

It wasn't that she couldn't figure out the Strategos' plans that worried her, because he was a strategos, because he devised plans that others couldn't figure out - but that in those few days from Aurelia's awakening until the *Łamichmura* returned, Esthlos Berbelek hadn't seen her even once. For a moment, she even thought that Janna-z-Gniezno might be right and the realization that she had opened herself up to such a thought at all banished Aurelia for a dozen or so hours to the Ostrog forests, where she didn't have to endure anyone's gaze, and was ashamed only of herself. On the Moon she would have run furiously through ashpits and pyrethrums until her body and mind were completely exhausted; here she walked slowly through dark streams and ravines, careful not to start a fire. She met a few hunters. Many more probably saw her without being seen by her. She raised her empty hands in greeting. Were there already horror stories told about her here? Perhaps King Casimir guessed correctly. If the Lady had forbidden her — through the voice of one of her hegemons — Aurelia would not have flown with Berbelek. So the Lady wanted Aurelia to accompany the Strategos of the Labyrinth to Earth.

They still saw her most often in Ostrog: hunters and animals — whom, not being a nimrod, she was unable to see and recognize in time, especially predators: shining eyes in the darkness and sudden rustles in the undergrowth. The forests of Świątowid were full of animals, wild, the wildest, with morphs untouched by human ingenuity, purposeless, serving only the purposes of the Forest. She soon understood that it was impossible to separate them — Świątowid and the forest — that the Vistulians themselves did not distinguish them. She came across crude sculptures made by them, totem poles like the axes of rotation of speeding greenery, driven here and there according to a secret plan, in an unchanging pattern for thousands of years — the seal of Świątowid's anthos, but older than Świątowid himself. She remembered one of Antidektes' blasphemies: The gods do not exist, but their Forms do, ready to be fulfilled by any Power, born with the birth of man.

In the manor, apart from the ten Horrors, Janna and the Strategos with his servants, probably none of whom left their rooms in the eastern wing, there were only a few old Vistulians, with whom Aurelia of course could not communicate in any way. From the Porte she knew about some elderly "Lady of the Manor," whose chambers were located just below Hieronim's — this must have been the Esthle she had seen on the night of her second awakening.

She met her once more, on the last night.

It had rained just after dusk; The moon was reflected in the puddles of the courtyard, a strange sight. Sitting on a stone table under an oak tree, Aurelia ate Świątowid pears and savored the air after a night of downpour. She knew she wouldn't be able to describe the smell when she got home.

She spat pear seeds under the well's rim.

The gray-haired Esthle emerged from the shadows of the orchard. The sleeves of her dress were rolled up high, her hands were stained black, the exotic glow of the moon thickened all the colors. The old woman stopped at the well, pushed the crane, lowering the bucket into the depths, the wood creaked loudly. Aurelia watched in silence. The Esthle put down the bucket and bent down to wash her hands. Aurelia finally recognized that color, the shine of that blackness.

She jumped off the table.

The Esthle looked at her.

"It's you."

"That's why you keep them here, whole packs of dogs."

"Aurelia, right?"

"Who was that?"

"My daughter. Come here."

Aurelia approached her.

The Esthle wiped off her hands.

"You're supposed to guard him."

"I am guarding him."

"He was never himself again after that. He loved her alone. Don't believe what they say about him now."

"Who are you?"

"Esthle Orlanda Sluva from Moscow. But I'll die here, in Ostrog." She pushed the sleeves of her dress down and put the bucket down. Up close, Aurelia could see numerous dark stains on the folded material, the whole dress was covered in blood. Probably just like when they first met, but Aurelia didn't pay attention then.

"It won't help, Esthle."

Esthle Orlanda didn't even look at the Moongirl anymore.

"They tore her apart" the old woman hummed in her girlish voice. "He taught her to hunt, he took her with him, I thought..."

"Yes?"

"Everything has changed."

She blinked.

"Look. You're burning."

"Esthle."

"You have to guard him, he'll come back here someday, after my death, but he'll return to himself, no one is born a strategos, my Aurelia, no one is born a victor and a tyrant."

"I MUST be a madman! After what we've been through on the ice...!" Omixos Zarnik shouted. "Look at those birds, Esthlos. If we go any lower, the aether won't hold, my boat will fall apart."

"You've already docked on the surface of the Earth, for a dozen or so hours"

observed Strategos Berbelek. "You've also gone down halfway across the stadium above Lode."

"I won't make that mistake again" stated the hegemon of the *Urkaj*.

Aurelia looked down through the uranoized floor of the hegemon's cabin in the head of the *Urkaj*. The whirling body of the boat (wings folded, tail straightened) was almost two stadia away from the motley jungle. They flew from the southwest. If we were to believe the Strategos's maps— the cracked pergalons of Esthlos Berbelek obscured half the landscape — if we were to believe them, they were exactly over the geographic center of the African Skoliodoi, five hundred stadia south of the Turtle River, eight thousand from the coast of the Western Okeanus. The location of that center could be assessed quite well with the naked eye from this height, because with the advancing Distortion the jungle lost its jungle form and green no longer dominated it, in fact no color dominated it, they looked from space at some chaotic mixture of all possible colors and shades, a babble of light painful to the eyes. Were there any trees still growing there? It is impossible to say. Rocks, plants, animals, water, fire, movement or stillness, shape or the end of shape, clouds of hard air or buildings and sculptures of smoke and flame — you squint your left eye, you see something else, you squint your right eye, you see something else, you close both, oh, maybe it is true!

How long had they been flying in the sky above the Skoliodoi, shaken by gusts of violent winds spewed from the Skoliodoi, turning slowly according to the energetic instructions of the Strategos, a little more to the north, a little more to the east — here, here, look, here the hardest battle will take place, the siege. Aurelia pressed her forehead to the warm aether, stretched out on the bare floor, shielding her eyes with her hands to look deeper into the colorful chaos under the *Urkaj*. Indeed, there could be no comparison to the Ice Skoliodoi or to those few much weaker Adynatos outposts discovered on the lonely islets of the Eastern and Western Oceans, sometimes so small that they had no name and were not described by any sailing routes. When asked where he got such precise maps of the Okeanian Skoliodoi, the Strategos confessed that the Evening Maiden had made them several years ago, based on reports she had collected about new sea monsters and knowledge about currents obtained from Okeanian pilots; which is why she had visited all the largest ports in Europe. It took Aurelia a moment to realize that the cacomorph that attacked the rats' ships didn't have to be a surprise to Esthlos Berbelek; that Esthlos Berbelek had most likely deliberately

chosen such a place for their meeting. He had the maps.

The *Urkaj* rose to the spheres of aether, spread its wings, let itself be carried away by the epicycles of uranoise and folded its wings again, having circled the Earth to a new destination — thus they fell towards the blindingly white Southern Ice, towards the green abysses of Okeanos, towards the yellow sands of Africa.

The Ice Skoliodoi was every single long snowstorm, a white vortex driven over several hundred stadia, obscuring the earth, the ice and what, what on the ice. The moonboat descended just above the vortex, it was almost like a clash with anaires, small, sharp fragments of permafrost were digging into the aetherial armor of the *Urkaj*: a constant krrrrrrshkrukkk, as if they were scraping their sides along the ridges of ice reefs; everyone inside the boat shivered. After returning to the celestial sphere, Aurelia, together with her uncle and the star navigators, went out into the aether to look at the damage done. The surface of the uranoise hull, normally smooth as the face of a young pearl, now resembled a slag sinter, scar overlapping scar, wherever you looked, wherever you touched — scratches, dents, grooves. Worse still, the encounter with the Adynatos demorph had left its mark on the very construction of the boat, the coherence of its mechanics and the precision of its everlasting-machines: here and there, both a slight curvature of the orbit, an increase or decrease of the epicycle, while difference superimposed itself on difference and the curvature accumulated... Omixos was terrified. They spent nearly a week in Earth's orbit, the mekanikos of the *Urkaj* patiently tuning the boat's aether. Aurelia took the opportunity to tune her armor. The on-board medic also had a job: in fact, all the doulos of the *Understar* suffered from various cacomorphies as a result of contact with the Ice Skoliodoi: frozen eyeballs, melting fingernails and teeth, constant joint pain, their tongues froze to the roof of their mouths, and finally one of the slaves died; the sophistes then cut open the corpse, revealing lungs full of snow and a red icicle piercing the heart. Hegemon Zarnik firmly refused to make any further attempts to approach the landing sites of the Adynatos. It was unlikely that the Strategos would be able to convince him now or that he would be stupid enough to issue such an order.

Even to those uninhabited islands in the middle of Okeanos, the *Urkaj* did not go any closer than a stadium. Antidektes very much wanted to go down to their shores in person and take a closer look, as he said, at the "unborn Skoliodoi", "the naked and defenseless Adynatos". But he did not receive per-

mission. They circled the islands at a safe distance. Although whether it was really safe — that they could never say in advance. The island lying in the tenth western leaf was a habitat for flying fish, the hydra-aer cacomorphs glided in dense schools. Swarming from their underwater lairs in the reefs surrounding the atoll, they broke the water surface with a roar and sprayed a golden-blue fountain into the sky, hundreds, thousands of aeribas, their scales flashing blindingly in the tropical sun, as the school traced a complex spiral in the sky. Once, they encountered a dozen or so gulls, truffles, and after the gulls, they saw only a cloud of bloody feathers falling into the sea. Ryter Zarnik immediately raised the *Urkaj* another stadium.

The Strategos and sophistes were left to observe the islands through telescopes. The powerful lunar opticum, mounted in the head of the boat, allowed them to reduce this distance, but it was still a view from the outside, not allowing to look inside the Skoliodoi, to see its true form — they saw only this apparent chaos, like the shimmering surface of Okeanus. "Until you pierce it, submerge yourself and open your eyes underwater" said Antidektes "you will not learn the truth about the life of Okeanus, blinded by the reflections of the sun, you will write stupid treatises about the shape of waves and the colors of waves." Antidektes was ready to go down even to the Ice Skoliodoi.

He wanted to conduct various experiments. While still in Vistulia, he had bought several dozen animals in wooden cages — chickens, cats, dogs, snakes, and rodents — and taken them with him to the *Urkaj*. Aurelia recalled how much trouble there had been in transferring them from the *Łamichmura* to the *Urkaj*. The Oroneiges aerostat and the lunar boat met at the agreed point, fifty stadia above the roofs of Uuk. It was a dark night, the city lights were obscured by clouds, the light of the third-quarter moon was also weak and pale. A cold wind howled on high. Dozens of ropes and nets were strung between the Oroneiges tower and the Aether scorpion. The scorpion could only be entered through an opening in its main body, so the angel was aimed in this way, his scythe shone cold blue, the Aether of the *Understar* burned with a blue glow. The Oroneans leaned out from the windows and balconies of the minaret with torches and lamps in their hands, the wind extinguished the flames, they were relit, rocked the ships, now bringing them closer together, now moving them apart, the nets tightened, only to sink deep into that crack of light and darkness between the angel and the scorpion, and the wind carried away the curses and fearful cries of those passing by on the rope bridges. Indeed, one of the Strategos's slaves fell from the net stretched between the ships during the

transfer and disappeared with a scream in the windy darkness. He was carrying a cage of rats and the rats fell with him. Antidektes cursed and swore.

He knew that the *Urkaj* would fly over the Skoliodoi, he had prepared a whole plan.

"A lycote rope, three stadia long," he showed Aurelia. "That will certainly suffice. I will lower them into the very heart of the Crookedness. I have the best gypsy clock, it should hold, I will record everything down to the minute. What changes after what time, and when I repeat, at what distance from the center, whether faster or slower — that is how I will draw precise maps of the intensity of the Arretesian morph. If we were to conduct these studies weekly, monthly, or even annually, we would also gain specific, that is, numerologically expressed, knowledge about the strength and rate of the spread of Skoliodoi, and after a few years — even about a possible change in this rate, acceleration or deceleration. That I could calculate whether and when such a day would come when a truly inhuman Form would encompass the entire Earth: Skoliodoi would merge with Skoliodoi and the last island of the old world, with mountains, rivers, meadows, flowers, animals and people, their cities, crafts and arts, histories, languages and religions — would be swallowed up. A few cages with animals. Help me."

But in the end he had no chance to conduct any experiment. When after descending to the Southern Ice, the *Urkaj* returned for a few days to the celestial sphere and circled the Earth in a traditional drift epicycle, it tacked to it from the lunar sphere to the "Eloa": The Lady's boat, a great moth of the black aether. She folded her gigantic wings, thus accelerating the rotation of her long, rounded body, and approached the white head of the scorpion with her perfectly spherical head. They joined in an aetherial kiss, light flowed into light, the poisonous tail and heavy abdomen trembled. Hierokharis, The First Hyppyres, Hegemon of the Moon, entered the deck of the *Urkaj*. For Aurelia, of course, it was a great event, she had only seen the commander-in-chief of the Hyppyroi, the Lady's grandson, a few times before, never up close, he had never turned his gaze on her. This time he disappeared immediately with the Strategos Berbelek into the cabins of Omixos, they discussed the campaign plans for long hours; Aurelia was once again not allowed access to the secret.

She remained outside, a symbolic guard, in the passage leading to the internal skeleton of the *Urkaj*. From here she saw the ship's doulos transferring Antidektes' belongings from boat to boat — the old sophistes's greatest dream

was coming true, he would fly to the Moon, the gates of the Labyrinth Library would open before him. Although now standing to the side and supervising this move, he did not have the happiest face.

"I'll leave the animals, throw them out if they get in the way. It's a pity I won't be able to test my hypotheses anymore."

He chewed qahwa seeds thoughtfully. Aurelia followed his gaze. He looked down at his feet, where behind the speeding aetheric side of the *Understar* the narrow crescent of the Earth burned with blinding green: a fragment of Asia, Eastern Okeanus and the Land of Gaudat. Aurelia remembered how she herself had looked at the receding disk of the Moon, when she had left its sphere two and a half years ago together with Esthlos Berbelek. She had an unpleasant thought that in reality she was not so different from Antidektes the Alexandrian, that the same daimons moved them, perhaps more powerful, since he was ready to leave his world forever for the sake of divine curiosity. Up to now she had not had much sympathy for him: he knew who she was, and from the beginning he had treated her with contempt, keeping Aurelia at a distance. Only after some time did she understand that he behaved like that towards everyone. Which of course did not make him more likable. From the various remarks thrown by the Strategos she guessed Antidektes' story: he was corrupt, he had many political enemies, he was corrupt and he was in debt, he was running out of time. On the other hand, he did not sell himself to Esthlos Berbelek for money. Although indeed on the Moon the creditors will no longer catch him.

"But you did not really believe everything you told them," she half stated, half asked. The sophistes did not raise his eyes. Aurelia thought to herself: this is probably the last time I will ever see him, the Strategos does not need him anymore either, I can say whatever I want. "I wonder how much of the sophistes, all this wisdom gathered in great libraries, how much of it is the fruit of similar orders."

He smiled to himself.

"Wisdom is paid for, that's obvious. It's worse when they pay for stupidity." He popped another seed into his mouth. "You ask if I told them the truth. I don't know what the truth is, so I certainly wasn't lying either."

"You lied when you said you knew."

"Didn't you support your strategos' plan?"

"The Adynatos must be destroyed."

"But the Warlock is a poor victim?"

"But he didn't bring the Adynatos. Right?"

Antidektes looked at her with malicious satisfaction.

"How I like such ardent lovers of truth! I always kept a few in the academy, and when my mood was bad, I would go and ask a simple question, like: 'What is being?' or 'What is good?' or 'Who is your friend?' I felt better immediately." He cracked the qahwa seed and spat. "Do you want to know what I believed in that I didn't tell them? You don't want to. How could the Adynatos have acquired an interest in the earthly spheres? What could they have seen, felt there, beyond the sphere of the fixed stars, that aroused their curiosity and brought them to us? Order is unchanging harmony; that which is repetitive does not arouse wonder, the millionth orbit of the Sun around the Earth is no event. A sign is change, a sign is irregularity, a sign is the breaking of harmony. Five hundred and forty years ago, the Kratista Illeia Kollotropiana left the sphere of the Earth and settled on the Moon. Today you have entire cities there, a world enclosed in its own hierarchy of spheres, a second order superimposed on the order of the spheres of the Earth, a second center of the cosmos toward which the elements are arranged. Listen to this music. Do you hear how it sounds? A sacred rhythm, an eternal melody torn apart by a dissonance that grows with each century, a screech that goes through the entire sky. Trrrrrrrrr! That's what they heard, that's what they felt — that someone, something was disrupting the order of these spheres — and they flew. Where? Where was the first meeting, the first battle? Aren't they behaving in essence like a doctor trying to find the source of the disease? Where did they head first? The Strategos said that you're even holding a prisoner there. Of course. She must at least guess whose fault it is. Of course she wants to drive them away at all costs."

"Be silent."

"Now tell me, Flaming One: am I lying? Am I lying? Who's lying? Well? Goodbye."

Aurelia threw the cages with the animals and the rest of the things left by the sophistes into the aether as soon as the "Eloa" with him on board spread its black wings and rose back to the Moon. Now Aurelia regretted it a bit, it would have been a good opportunity to release a chicken or a dog into this boiling broth of colors and forms. She had no desire to make rigorous observations and experiments repeated in regular series, but it would be useful to check what the actual strength of this Distortion was. They will have to fight under the Arretes anthos — them: the Hyppyroi — in this war, human will clash with the inhuman, and the Fire Riders will stand on the front line — if not on Earth, then in the aether for sure, if not this year, then the next, if not under Strategos Berbelek, then under another hegemon. She felt that this battle was destined for her, that she was born for this battle.

Behind her back (she did not raise her head above the uranois floor) Omixos was discussing the strategy of the offensive with the Esthlos.

"The Southern Ice and these Okeanos islands are indeed so distant and separated from the inhabited lands that it is difficult to carry out any coordinated attack on them" said Omixos. "But there is no need to carry it out either — while they remain separated. They actually chose places with minimal chance of contact with civilization, well-hidden outposts."

"But here, but what — it already touches the Golden Kingdoms, it leaves its mark on Axum, Aegypt, Huratia. From here they can launch a direct assault and here they are strongest. Here, in Africa we must strike."

"I know, Esthlos, I know. But — you see for yourself."

They had already passed the center of the Skoliodoi, they were heading for the Turtle River. Aurelia watched as the colors and forms of the non-jungle changed under the *Urkaj* — how they never changed, because for change some regularity must be broken, and where there is no regularity at all or where the regularity is so overwhelmingly absolute, there can be no talk of any change. The Strategos had told her of the "City of The Adynatos," of the gossip spread by the local savages — gossip about great structures, artificial creations, buildings erected deep in the Crooked Lands. She watched for anything that would pierce the surface of the seething cacomorphy. Indeed, there were occasional departures from the uniform motley of the amorphous wilderness, objects that loomed above, slight differences: something like a rock, something like a bone, something like a water arch, something like night, something like a standing tornado, and

the night inside it — they flew over and she looked in. Sometimes birds flew over the Skoliodoi. Cacomorphs, of course, but still birdlike enough — they had wings, and sometimes a beak — to be attributed to this Form. She watched their flight closely. If they went too low, they changed into another Form in flight, most of them falling like a stone into the non-jungle — perhaps petrified indeed. Once, however, she saw the reverse process: a fragment of the motionless yellow-red-black cacomorphy suddenly changed in the shadow of the *Urkaj* into a winged turtle and rose into the air; immediately its wings turned into rainbow jellyfish, and its shell began to smoke, and the cacomorph fell back into the Skoliodoi.

"Fighting in the jungle — there is nothing worse. How to surround them? Where will you come from, Esthlos? From Axum?"

"The Golden Kingdoms will open to any sufficiently strong army. Of course, Axum too, we will have to go from the east, Ephrem will go. Show me this map. Do you see how the mountains, rivers and deserts are arranged? We will go, oh, from here and from here, like this."

"Push them to Western Okeanus."

"Yes."

"But look at the distances themselves. Tens of thousands of stadia. Dry seasons, rainy seasons, supply lines, for God's sake, supply alone is a problem worthy of Odysseus. You're talking about a campaign on the scale of Alexander, Esthlos."

"Yes. It'll take, I know. Probably much longer than the war in the aether."

"This jungle... I can't imagine it. Look: whoever gets into this — I thought about it. I was looking for solutions. I consulted with the astromekans of the Labyrinth. Hierokharis brought me the latest calculations. You on the Moon create artificial pyrotechnics in this way, you bring them safely to the wastelands. Discharges from the short circuit of the epicycles of Fire, bolts of pure pyrotechnics straight from the celestial spheres. If it worked..."

"You intend to burn half of Africa."

"To expel the Skoliodoi."

"Kyrios..."

"I know. That is why the Lady wants me to make the decisions. But it is not that simple: The sophistes Aker the Numismatist claims that first we would have to return these lands to the earthly morph, to place here the anthos of the old order, where fire burns, water flows, and air spreads flames, otherwise I can hit with pyrotechnics as much as I want and I will not burn a blade of grass. Because there is no grass there anymore. The offensive must go ahead anyway. Now watch. You will check the following routes for me."

Aurelia heard this conversation and understood the words, but no imagination could evoke a stronger emotional reaction in her. Cosmic lightning burning half a continent — that will certainly be a beautiful and terrible spectacle.

She felt like a little girl again, listening hidden behind the hedges of the fern grove to the conversations of adults, to the fascinating stories of the Hyppyroi about battles fought with the anaires on the Other Side and about long voyages through the high aether, to the sphere of Mercury, Venus, to the burning Sun, the sacred sphere of the Hyppyroi, where some pyr Ryters go mad, are seized by a mortal longing, pin ikaros to their armor and fly straight into the Sun, there is no stopping them, it is the voice of fiery blood... Terrifying, fascinating, incomprehensible stories, repeated in whispers among children and then reborn in little Aurelia's hundred-hour dreams, moon dreams that are like Homer's song, dreaming them once is not enough. She knew that next month she would dream of a battle in the African non-jungle and Zeus's pyrotechnics falling from the night sky onto that tangled wool of cacomorphy that was now sliding under the *Urkaj*'s bulwark.

Their voices reached her from the other side of her daydream.

"Then you will fly directly to Amida, as we agreed. These orbital maps of the Urals are not the most important thing at the moment. Is everything clear?"

"Yes, Esthlos."

"How long will it take us to reach that oasis? He is already waiting there."

"We will jump into the aether, catch a strong northern epicycle, three hours, Esthlos."

"Then that's it. Orders!"

Aurelia watched the sun-drenched Skoliodoi recede from them, escaping down from under the uranoic armor of the rising boat, and she noticed something strange then: their vision encompassed ever greater spaces, the scale of the perceived chaos changed, but if it weren't for the external signs — the curvature of the horizon, the tremors of the air, finally the clouds — she wouldn't have been able to tell. The Skoliodoi remained the same, no matter from what height it was seen, no matter to what extent the waves of its cacomorphy — pouses, stadia, or hundreds of stadia were stretched. The same, indistinguishable, nameless aform.

From the briefly visited aether they fell back into the spheres of pyr and aer, and pyr again, as it seemed to Aurelia, as the whirling *Understar*, with folded wings and scorpion pincers stretched forward, sped over the infinity of white sand, over northern Sadara, the oldest desert in it, all quivering with the heat it exhaled. Aurelia waited for the end of this monotony of symmetrical dunes and the shadows of their slopes — shadows growing longer as the Sun sank to the level of the scorpion's left shoulder. Purple rays illuminated the speeding aether.

The Oasis of the Jealous Skeleton was on the very border of wild Sadara, on the border of the anthos of Nebuchadnezzar the Golden, 3,000 stadia southwest of Alexandria. Strategos Berbelek had chosen it as the meeting place because no trade routes had passed through it since the Exile of Illeia and there was no need to fear any random witnesses. In fact, the Oasis of the Jealous Skeleton was one well under the sand, one ancient pylon, toppled, half-buried and polished by winds and djinns to a bone-like smoothness, and a cluster of several dozen porous boulders. Beyond Illeia, palm trees grew here, grass was green, birds sang, there was no trace of it.

The *Urkaj* moored to the top of the pylon, dug its scorpion tail into the ground. Likot nets were let down from the boat's mouth. Aurelia descended ahead of the Strategos. She jumped down onto the hot sand, sinking into it up to her ankles. The people standing in front of the tents set up among the boulders watched in silence, shielding their eyes from the blue light of the moonboat, some making intoxicating gestures, others spitting in the sand; The locals, who numbered several dozen in a separate camp behind the boulders, crouched down, raising their leather shields.

Aurelia did not wait for the baggage to be lowered from the *Understar* and followed Esthlos Berbelek. Only the two of them got out here. Janna, Haser Obolo with the horrors, even Porte and the servants and doulos, all of whom had already been sent away by the Strategos in the *Cloudbreaker*. Porte returned home to Alexandria, but where had the soldiers gone? Aurelia supposed that the Strategos had indeed yielded to Nebuchadnezzar's blackmail and was indeed preparing an attack on Babylon.

"Esthlos."

"Your Majesty."

Hieronim Berbelek squeezed the wrist of Marius Seleucid. The King Without a Crown was the first to come out to meet him from the tents; the entire armed retinue followed him, Aurelia recognized the colors of the Pergamon diaspora. Above the tents fluttered the Seleucid banner and another with the Four Sword, the symbol of the Fourth Pergamon, known until then only from scribbles on the city walls of Aegypt, Babylon, Macedonia and Rome: three broken swords, the fourth, with a golden blade, whole. It is true, the Oasis of the Jealous Skeleton is not the Marketplace of the World, nevertheless the raising of these banners was an infallible sign. Aurelia's heart beat faster. For half a century, Amida had been under the anthos of the Warlock, Pergamon — The Seven-Fingers. All or nothing; there would be no turning back.

Marius led the Strategos to his tent. Aurelia did not leave the Esthlos' side. She was surrounded by Amidani in sandy julbabas, abbes and burnouses, dirty turbans and trouffes, with greasy beards, heavy keraunets in their hands and crooked kanjars at their belts. She herself, following the example of the Strategos, put on a white kirouffa. She had never carried any weapon, fire destroyed it too easily. They did not know her, in their eyes she was a defenseless woman of an alien morph.

On the other hand, the Iganazi did not seem to differ from ordinary people. If it weren't for his exceptionally massive build, broad shoulders and thick neck, and thick, stiff hair, he wouldn't be any different. Aurelia walked right behind him, and when she lowered her gaze, she saw that Marius was barefoot and, despite his weight, not only didn't sink into the sand, but didn't leave any traces in it. He could — and had to — hide it, but the people closest to him would always know that he was who he was, A Daimon of Earth, Iganazi, gesomata.

The oil lamps and incense were already burning in the tent. The slave girls were boiling water. The Seleucidite made a gesture of farewell to all his companions, but Aurelia, despite the Strategos's heavy gaze, decided not to be asked to leave this time and, throwing the hood of her kirouffa over her head, quickly sat down in the corner of the tent, in the shade behind the mast and the Persian carpet drawn from it. A green-blue parrot was sitting on the carpet; she alone completely ignored Aurelia. The slave girls, with bodies covered in colorful tattoos and faces tied with trouffas, hung with cheap jewelry that jingled with every movement, gave Marius and Esthlos Berbelek water to wash, hashish, qahwa, cinnamon cakes and fruit. The tent flap was lowered, from then on only the flickering glow of tin lamps illuminated the stuffy interior. The heavy, oily smell of the incense made Aurelia want to vomit, but she didn't say anything until after a while one of the slaves, on her own initiative, handed her a cup of hot qahwa. By then the sweet smell of spiced hashish filled the tent. The king and the Strategos exchanged the first pleasantries, and thus — from desert wolf to desert whisper — the council of war began. They spoke Greek, Aurelia understood every word.

The words were prosaic, the sentences short, the tone dispassionate. It was this tone that she would remember best. It seemed that everything had been decided: It was already happening or would happen soon, it had begun. Dates, places, names, numbers. From the bits of information she overheard, she built a picture of the beginning of the war. There would be no storming of the walls of Amida and no siege of the city — the insurgents would enter with other travelers, with merchant caravans and slave transports. They would occupy the garrison, take over the walls, and keep the gates open until the Horror of Berbelek arrived from the west, from Pergamon and Alexandria. Three full Columns of Horror will land at Pergamon, landing at the signal from the *Cloudbreaker* — now waiting in the Mediterranean Sea on the ships of the Njute, Ikita & Berbelek Merchant House, on the ships of Aneis Panatakis and the African Company. Over 4,000 stadia separate Amida from Pergamon. By stopping or shooting down all the foreign air pigs and carrier birds (which the scorpion Omrxos Zarnik will take care of), we gain at least six days' advantage; the line of Aegyptian heliographs does not pass that way. So should we besiege mighty Pergamon until the end, or go to Amida, without waiting, just to crown Marius? Here again, various variants, assumptions and plans began. Will the Amidan Uprising rouse enough men to provide Marius with an army capable of taking control of the entire country? After fifty-eight years of partition and the non-existence

of the state, has his Form still remained strong enough to now overcome the anthoses of the Warlock and the Seven-Fingers, the Form of their states? That, it is true, is the very limit of their auras — but who will guarantee that the King Without a Crown will prove to be a sufficiently powerful King With a Crown? The Strategos made ironic comments on this subject. Marius only blew hashish smoke. It seemed to Aurelia that they both treated the matter as a trivial joke; when he returned, they acknowledged him with silent glances and shrugs. What will Maksym Rog do? What will The Seven-Fingers do? Unless the Fourth Pergamon quickly receives support from one of its neighbors — and between Babylon, the Ural Empire, Macedonia, and Aegypt, the last one they could count on was the most — it would be crushed within months. The Strategos, however, seemed certain that Aegypt would support him. A long dialogue ensued about the political consequences of the coup. The names of the Hypatia's daughters and bawdy jokes began to be mentioned. Esthlos Berbelek's plan also included changing the dynastic order in Alexandrian Africa.

It was impossible for Janna to be right — but she undoubtedly knew Hieronim Berbelek better. Aurelia understood that this was not a question of choice, loyalty, not a question of truth or lies. It was the cold logic of strength and weakness. For this was the paradox that the Moon Witch faced: those who were too weak to oppose her Form were certainly also too weak to stand against the Kratistos of Adynatos; and those who are strong enough — are too strong, they do not need Illeia, they themselves are Power. So who will go into the heavenly battle and kill the Father of Distortion?

Only gods and madmen sacrifice themselves for humanity — the rest, on the other hand, are capable of sacrifices only for those they consider better than themselves.

She listened motionless and silent, the hood of the kirouffa hid her face, only sparks flashed in the shadows. If the Strategos betrays the Lady, I will not allow him, I cannot allow him to go free. Isn't that why I was sent here? I will do what befits a Ryter — before he comes to fulfill Janna's order.

At dawn Marius Gesomata broke camp and set out with his men in a long caravan of camels and humyia against the rising Sun, on their way through Sadara, across the Nile and the Erythraean Sea, and north through the Ephremian Jazirat al-Arab, to Amida, the city of his ancestors. He had no army yet, but he had standards.

In the Oasis of the Jealous Skeleton there remained only four humyia, and two of them were for the Strategos and the Moonwoman. Aurelia refused; she had never ridden any mounts. She would run alongside the animals, along with the local warriors; She took off her kirouffa so that it would not restrict her movements. The warriors bared their crooked teeth at her. The Strategos told her that their name was N'Zui, and that the one who led them was their new chieftain, N'Te; he had recently killed his father and was held in high regard. He alone had a keraunet. He grinned at Aurelia with the greatest joy.

The Strategos wrote something else in his journal and gave the signal with a roar. The warriors raised a groaning chant. The roar pointed north, into the morph of civilization, towards Aegypt and Alexandria. The sun climbed higher and higher above the horizon, in its great, bright disk, which only Aurelia could look at, the figures of the Amidian rebels melted, only the gold of the Marian banner flashed — and they disappeared in the dawn.

The Strategos lashed the humiya, Aurelia jumped to the animal's side, the sand turned to glass under her feet — running through the fire, leaving behind traces of lightning.

"Nnnyaaaiiii!" the N'Zui shouted.

The Strategos laughed with his full lungs.

"This is how empires fall!" He waved his rykta, embracing with his gesture half a hundred naked tribesmen armed with short spears and buffalo shields. "This is how empires are made!"

20 Martius 1197 PUR, Dies Jovis. In two months Marius Seleucid will sit on the throne of Amida or be dead, triumph or fall to dust; and Hieronim Berbelek with him.

T.
The Motherland

"A very flattering dress."

"Thank you, Esthle."

"It's a wig, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"Wait, you must be..."

"Ryter Aurelia Kruzos."

"Ah. Indeed. Father wrote to me about you."

"Esthle."

"Alithea, Alithea for you. You must have saved his life once."

"Twice."

"Ha, right, one shouldn't be impudent in modesty. You have to tell me everything. Actually, why haven't we met before?"

"I've heard about your fiancé. I'm very sorry."

"Teknitoi soma never leave his bed, he'll finally get back on his feet. I just wonder if I'll meet him at all then. Do you like Chremit wines?"

"Esthle."

"Please."

"You are very beautiful."

"Thank you. Years of work and Nebuchadnezzar. Come, let us sit in the carium."

The musicians changed the tune, applause rang out, several couples came out of the dance hall to the peristyle. The black surface of Lake Mareot reflected millions of stars and the bright red crescent of the moon. The torches on the guards' boats formed a winding line along the eastern bay in the darkness of the Aegyptian night. Above them, on the Beleutic Bridge, the flat shadows of pedestrians and animals, of victuals and carts, moved — Alexandria never quite falls asleep.

The carium was located on the third terrace, at the water's edge. They sat under an arch of black lilies — the flower of the dzunguon morph, its scent more animal than plant.

Esthle Alithea Latek sipped her wine, looking thoughtfully at the gallery of living statues.

"You accompany him everywhere and certainly —"

"Not everywhere."

"But no one is closer to him, right? Why did he choose you, exactly?"

"I don't know, Esthle. I was young, naive."

"Is that bad?" Alithea laughed quietly. "I'm younger than you."

"You are different."

"We? Earthlings?"

"You, aristocrats."

"Once, Ryters were considered aristocrats..."

"In reality, you are older than me."

"Naivety is a very valuable trait."

"But no truly naive person knows that, does he?"

They laughed in unison in a friendly morph, Alithea nudged Aurelia on the shoulder and assumed a caricaturally serious expression for a moment. The moon girl laughed with golden sparks and blue smoke, tiny flames flowing from her head onto her shoulders, breasts, back. Alithea put down the wine goblet and, fluttering her fan, raised this wave of sparks into the night sky. They watched them until the sparks disappeared beyond the edge of the terrace. A few twisted and fell onto the oiled skin of the living statue, the doulos shuddered involuntarily. This cheered the girls up again. The moon girl took off her black wig. Alithea widened her eyes. She burst into hiccups from laughter; This was definitely not her first glass of wine that evening. Aurelia hit her in the back. Alithea jumped on the bench, scalded; her left breast flashed silver, falling among the lilies.

They leaned over, looking for the diamond ornament.

"The day before yesterday, when we returned from the city and found father at home," Alithea continued, parting the black shoots and not looking at Aurelia, "and you must know that we had no idea you were coming, the porter didn't tell us... I didn't follow Shulima, but I heard my father's voice and turned back in the corridor. Their first words... After all, after the Jurja Ihmet Zajdar ate out of my father's hand, he wouldn't have done it against him. Tell me, Aurelia: did the Strategos give him a raki order?"

"What?"

"You know. For Shulima."

"No."

"Will you swear?"

"I didn't hear anything like that. Ihmet..."

"Yes?"

"No, nothing, I don't know."

The diamond sparkled in the stone pot, Alithea picked up the little ring. She sat down and, having wiped it with a scarf pulled from behind the wide belt of her skirt, fastened it again.

"Of course you realize who Esthle Amitace is" Aurelia muttered, putting on her wig.

"Yes."

"Who?"

"Her daughter."

"Nebuchadnezzar is holding her hostage."

Alithea covered her mouth with her fan.

"I guessed."

"You look a lot like her, you know, the face, the figure, the voice, I talked to her yesterday, even the voice, just the color of your hair, if you transformed it into such a bright gold as Lakatoi — like a daughter."

Alithea lowered her gaze.

"She told me that."

"Yes?"

"He won't agree, I know he won't agree. Besides, my father would be furious. Nebuchadnezzar would definitely want to take revenge on me."

"What are you talking about?"

"About your idea of a swap. It won't work."

"What idea? I just noticed that you are similar — like mother and daughter, sister and sister."

"Oh. Yes. Well, she told me, she told me many times. Sometimes I think..."

"Suddenly Alithea burst into nervous laughter, her fan fluttered frantically."

"I shouldn't be so honest with you, you'll tell him everything!"

"That's good, isn't it?"

"Shulima was convinced that it was her father who sent Zajdar here. He didn't deny it. What else did they argue about?"

"Did they argue?"

"They always do..."

"What did the Strategos say?"

"Oh, now you're asking me questions."

"Please."

Alithea took a deep breath; tilting her head, she looked at Moonlight over her fan.

"'The Lady's plan is not my plan.'"

"Did he say that?"

"'The Lady's goals are my goals, but the Lady's plan is not my plan.'"

"What did Lakatoia say to that?"

"Here they began to argue. Shulima kept repeating that he must have a country from which he could launch an offensive, must have a safe base and a starting point for an attack on both Skoliodoi and the Warlock. If Nebuchadnezzar does not open Aegypt for the Strategos, what will the Strategos have left? And so on. That the Golden One hates the Widower by himself; that it is not about fighting Blackbeard's Macedonia and Babylon one by one, but about separating them and maybe even turning them against the Urals; that Nebuchadnezzar only needs to be pressed harder, scared, and he will agree. A whole tirade. I stopped at the door, I did not go in, I did not want to greet him in the middle of this brawl."

"But what did he answer her?"

"That he will have this country anyway. Shulima only sneered: 'Huratia? Macedonia? Rome, perhaps?' The Strategos: 'I will create a new one.' He

slammed the door. Fortunately, he did not come out near me."

Aurelia opened her mouth, looked back at the living statues — and closed it again. Grabbing Alithea by the arm, she pulled her to the farthest corner of the third terrace, where the glow of torches and lanterns and the glow from the palace windows did not reach. Here the peristyle descended into the shallow water, the snow-white mosaic tiles glowed under the waves of the lake, in the shallows crooked-headed ibises walked majestically. Esthle Latek was in platform sandals, but Aurelia — barefoot. She waded through the cold hydor.

"Listen" she whispered, turning her back on the palace and the carium, the lights, the voices and the music. "You can call me naive, but I wouldn't tell you that if you weren't who I think you are."

"What again?"

"Shh. Listen. They always ask: does she intend to come back? Does she intend to take revenge? Is this her day? Is this what the war of the Strategos Berbelek is for? I say no, that she won't leave the Moon for long, and besides, she can't, what would happen to all of us, to the people and animals, the imopatras and the cities, they would fall to Earth. So no. That's the truth. But now I see that she had another plan. I think I know what the Strategos was talking about. Listen. This was her country. Here her heart beat, from the Golden Kingdoms to Kaftor; Aegypt is what she longs for the most. If her daughter had died here in Nebuchadnezzar's captivity... Nebuchadnezzar would have been convinced that Illeia would sacrifice everything to take revenge on him for that... Think. In this way, quickly and without a fight, she would have conquered Aegypt for her morph; in this way she would have opened it to the Strategos. Further. Who would sit on the Hypatia's throne? In your name, in your morph, when Lakatoia is no longer. Think, Esthle. The only daughter of the Strategos of the Labyrinth, the Slayer of the Warlock, and also the wife of the Governor of Upper Aegypt, the nexus of Thebes and Alexandria. Lakatoia chose you and morphed you in this image and likeness, in her image and likeness. This is your legacy — if she died. Now she must change everything, the plan has changed, the Strategos changes the plan."

Alithea thoughtfully put her folded fan to her left nostril. A moment ago she had raised her eyebrows and shook her head; now she looked at the Moon with calm and perhaps even slight amusement.

"The Adynatos? An alliance against the cacomorphy."

"Of course, Esthle, that is the main goal."

"She does not expect the Strategos to survive."

"No. If he really leads an attack on their Kratistos in the aether... No. You will remain."

"Abel died in The Skoliodoi."

"It had to be a female from the beginning, the morph of a woman."

"I could have died."

"I don't know. Could you?"

"Why not some Moonwoman, she certainly has other children, why not someone from the Labyrinth, someone she knows?"

"Aegypitians, Earthlings are supposed to accept supremacy. That's what I guess; think for yourself. Someone among them, connected with their blood — but really a morph of the Lady. Another body and the name of the same deity."

"I would have borne David daughters."

"Yes."

"The beginning of the Kollotropian Dynasty. After the fall of the Ural Empire... East, south, to the Turtle River and beyond, all the Golden Kingdoms, and north, back to Kaftor, an empty throne in Knossos..."

"You see it."

"I see it."

"Alithea shook her head, throwing her hair, plaited into small braids, back, straightened, and looked the Hyppyres straight in the eye. She touched Aurelia's chest with her fan. "Who do you serve? Who do you belong to? Why are you telling me this?"

Aurelia bowed her head.

"That's why. I am a knight of the Lady, I owe her first loyalty."

"So?"

"Under whatever name and in whatever body she may appear."

Aurelia knelt before Esthle Latek, her Kaftorian dress immediately filled with cold Mareot water. Aurelia pressed her face to the white linen of Esthle's skirt.

"Despoina."

Alithea quickly grabbed her by the shoulders, pulled her up.

"Stand up! Or they'll see you! I am not her."

"Look at Lakatoia. So she's not."

"Shut up already. I have to think."

Aurelia vigorously shook the water from her dress, steam rising from the fabric with a hiss. She looked up the peristyle. Esthlos Berbelek threw a feast — with theater, music, and dancing — for the elite of the Alexandrian aristocracy; almost all accepted his invitation. Alexandrian newspapers wrote of "Hieronim Berbelek's army financed from private sources" and of "The Historic Victory of Piorun Vistul in Kolenica." The amount of fantastic gossip about Berbelek's intentions that Aurelia had heard from the guests so far (and it was not yet midnight) exceeded all measure; the gossips contradicted themselves in subsequent conversations, the pyramid of absurdity grew.

Perhaps it was the Form that provoked Aurelia that evening to confess her own suspicions to the Strategos' daughter; or perhaps it was the Form of sudden cordiality and familiarity when they laughed together and searched for the little ring. The smallest things determine the greatest things. The longer Esthle Latek remained silent in thought, the more certain Aurelia was of her judgment. That flick of her wrist. That tone of voice. The raising of her head, the slight smile, the look of wide-open eyes, those eyes, just as green. The morph of her stillness. Like yesterday, when the Lady of the Evening looked at Aurelia. "Tell me" two words, that's all she said. Aurelia spoke for an hour.

"Come."

"Esthle."

"Tell me exactly. Nebuchadnezzar, Shulima, Strategos, conditions. Not what you guess, but what you heard."

They returned to the dance hall. Aurelia tried not to raise her voice above a whisper; she also instinctively stepped back, remaining half a step behind Esthle Latek. Thus they moved among the guests, among the servants, doulos, musicians and dancers; at this hour everyone was already mingling, the order of the reception planned by the host yielding to the influence of momentary social pressures. The fourth time, the jamedia was played, because it was the most requested. The jamedia was a compromise between the classical Korea, performed by hired specialists, and the "rhythmics of the common folk" derived from the northern morphs. Over twenty couples danced. From the columned hall, from behind the water mirrors, came bursts of laughter every now and then: there was a troupe of comedians from Kroikodylopolis, giving a performance that made vulgar fun of Hypatia and the Aegean aristocrats — the aristocrats laughed the loudest. All the pyrokine lamps were burning with high flames, additional lanterns were hung under the mirrors: the light burned through the colorful robes, pierced the skin of the guests, shadows did not exist, there was too much light, it poured out in stormy waves, onto the peristyle and onto the lake, along with loud music. When the aristocrats are having fun, half of Alexandria knows about it.

Alithea and Aurelia slipped along the walls, only stopping for a moment when old Cadius Ptolemy asked Esthle Latek about her father and refused to accept "I don't know" for an answer. Aurelia could indeed see neither the Strategos Berbeleck nor the Lady of the Evening anywhere.

The seneschal, standing in the passage to the main hall, whispered something in Alithea's ear; the Hyppyres did not understand the hurried Pahlavi. The Esthle replied in the same language and pointed with her fan into the house. The seneschal bowed and nodded to one of the waiting slaves. She ran off to carry out the order.

Esthle Latek led the Moongirl to the left wing. Between the floorboards of the side corridor, the waves of Lake Mareot shimmered in the glow of the pyrokine lamps. These were probably the Esthle's private chambers. A dark-skinned servant came out to meet them; the Esthle dismissed her with an imperceptible gesture.

They turned into a corner study. Two of its walls, as well as the floor and ceiling, were made of thick Vodenburg glass, into which red veins of oroneiges had been embedded. The walls also opened horizontally on the axes of hidden mechanisms, thus letting in moist air. As soon as the Esthle entered, she opened them even further. She turned up the flames in the silver-pink lampshades — the room pulsed with a colorful glow.

Along the stone walls stood bookcases, a bureau and a high, deep armchair; under the glass walls, on the other hand, piles of colorful cushions were scattered, round and triangular, according to the form of the Golden Kingdoms.

Alithea sat down in the armchair with a sigh and beckoned to the Moon. Aurelia sat down at her feet (the glass was very cold). Raising her head, she saw movement in the darkness above the transparent ceiling. The ceiling was also partially subject to mechanical manipulation, it could be tilted here and there into the interior of the glass superstructures. In this one, a cacomorphic bird flapped its icy wings above the armchair, its three paws spread out into collections of curved beaks, now all of them, half-open, scratched against the glass. He must have sensed the fire in the Fire Rider.

Esthle Latek took Aurelia under the chin, turning her eyes towards her.

"I have heard you, Aurelia," she said gently. "I believe you. Now you can still tell me everything, nothing has happened yet. Deny it and I will forget."

"I did not lie, Despoina."

"Because in a moment you will have to pay. Do you understand me? I like you."

"I did not lie."

"Good."

Esthle Latek looked up. She folded her fan and tucked it into the belt of her skirt. Aurelia realized that Esthle was looking at her reflection in the glass. Alithea unfastened her earrings from her ears, her piercings from her nipples, her heavy necklace from her neck, pulled her bracelets from her forearms, most of the rings from her fingers; she threw all this jewelry on the bureau. After licking her scarf, she wiped the dye from her face and breasts. Finally, she unfastened her dragonbone brooch from her belt.

"You will go to your own place," she said to Aurelia.

"You will change. Take off all your ornaments, put on something that will give them something to think about. Do you have any spectacular lunar costume?"

"I have armor. Oh, indeed, he wrote to me..."

"But don't exaggerate. Maybe just a part of it."

"Yes, Despoina."

"You will ask the seneschal to show you to Esthle Ignatia the Ashakanid; she couldn't have left yet. You will ask her here on my behalf. Publicly, if possible. Do not answer any questions. I will wait. You will remain inside. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Despoina."

"Go."

Aurelia went to her chamber almost running. It was not a battle, but something as close to it as possible. She threw off her dress, removed her wig and jewelry. She washed herself quickly in a prepared basin of perfumed water. From the trunk of her bedroom she took a simple, long Aegyptian skirt, similar to Alithea's. She tied it high above her waist, in lunar fashion. From the swinging chest she took the right shoulder-piece and the right vortex gauntlet; she put them on, tuned the aether. Having clenched her fist, she waved her hand. Fiery epicycles lit up the chamber like a flash of lightning.

The guests parted before her, the Form of silent consternation preceded Aurelia in a slow wave. Each subsequent step of the Ryter was more energetic — leaning over the seneschal, she already spread a shimmering glow, the tension of the muscles released the epidermis of pyr.

Esthle Ignatia the Ashakanid was dancing with some aristocrat of the Upper Egyptian morph. Aurelia placed her left hand on the aristocrat's shoulder, stopping him in mid-step. The silence in the hall should have warned him; He was clearly too focused on his partner. He turned around in anger. The white uranoise of the swollen shoulder-strap cut his shirt and the skin on his chest. He jumped back with a hiss.

Aurelia looked at the Ashakanid.

"Esthle Alitea Latek asks you to talk to her for a moment, Esthle."

Lady Ignatia gave her a quick glance, still slightly out of breath from dancing.

She calmed her breathing and looked around the hall.

"Laetitia, be so kind."

She nodded to Aurelia.

They left amidst a buzz of excited whispers. Now the gossip will start! Which was undoubtedly what Esthle Latek was talking about.

They found Alithea stretched out on pillows in a glass corner of the chamber. Resting her head on her elbow, she ate dates from a silver bowl; in her left hand she turned a Pythagorean cube. She smiled and nodded in a friendly way at Esthle Ignatia. Aurelia stayed by the door, closing it with a loud bang. She noticed that the armchair was now standing on the opposite side of the bureau, and the jewelry that had been thrown on its top had also disappeared.

The beautiful Ignatia looked back at the Moongirl and again at Esthle Latek — the moment dragged on — finally she wrapped up her skirt and sat down next to Alithea.

"I don't know if your father would approve of such demonstrations" she muttered.

"The Moon's trust in the Strategos Berbelek is not limitless" said Esthle Latek.

"Especially the loss of her daughter may not please Illeia the Cruel."

"Mhmmm, I don't understand."

"Could it be that the Golden One did not know? The Lady also set conditions for the Strategos."

"Still no"

"The attack of the nimrod Zajdar? The spies certainly reported everything to Nebuchadnezzar. Who do you think sent Zajdar here?" Alithea continued to

smile. She looked at Esthle Ignatia, turning the open mechanism of the cube between the fingers of her left hand. "So now imagine this. Esthle Amitace dies in Nebuchadnezzar's captivity. The Strategos sends his report to the Moon; he will write in it what he writes. How does the Witch react?"

Lady Ignatia, clearly shaken, looked back at Aurelia. Aurelia stood motionless, looking straight ahead, at the night and the distant lights of Alexandria behind the thick glass.

"Has he been pushed away?" Esthle Ignatia asked Aurelia or Alithea, both of them. "Who's giving the orders now? You, Esthle? Shulima?"

"Not yet. But the situation is no longer as clear-cut as you apparently thought. How exactly did Nebuchadnezzar formulate his demands? Babylon is for supporting the Strategos. Esthle Amitace is a guarantee until the victory over the Adynatos. But that's not —"

"Does he realize that no offensive can be launched here without Aegypt's participation? In the end, he would have the entire anti-Adynatos alliance against him. Berbelek took Kolenica, he will wrest further lands from the Warlock, the war will already run its course, the Warlock has made himself enough mortal enemies who are just waiting for the right form, a moment in history."

"What are you trying to convince the Golden One of?"

Esther Ignatia was irritated.

"Shulima hasn't sent a letter to her mother yet. As you know, I am her closest friend here" Alithea smiled sweetly. "Nebuchadnezzar still has a chance — Illeia may not find out about anything, there was no blackmail."

"By Sheol, Shulima has nothing to do with it, Shulima is not a bargaining chip! We must have some guarantee when we leave Earth!"

"That is not how it looks for Illeia, I assure you. If Nebuchadnezzar joined unconditionally... But he claims that he will not leave Earth, he will not take part in the attack on The Skoliodoi — so what guarantee are we talking about here? The head of the Evening Maiden is being bargained for for the head of Seven-Fingers, that is the truth. Remember Zajdar. How little it will take for all this to turn against the Golden One. If you thought that Strategos Berbelek

had control over this, you thought wrong. No one controls the anger of Illeia the Cruel. Remember the fate of Oea."

Aurelia remembered the Song of Oea, one of the terrible fables of the Labyrinth. Oea was a Phoenician city on the African shore of the Mediterranean Sea. During the Lady's reign in the Golden Kingdoms, one of her lovers, returning from Rome, happened to stop for a few days in Oea. There he won a high bet with a local aristocrat (legends differed as to the nature of the bet); the humiliated aristocrat poisoned the Lady's lover. Illeia arrived at the next full moon. All the inhabitants of Oea were crucified, the city burned and razed to the ground, and the earth itself sank beneath the surface of the sea. Thirteen nimrods went to all corners of the world in search of the surviving relatives and friends of the aristocrat poisoner. A century or two later, the Lady took her revenge on the descendants of those unfortunates as they were found.

"You scare me," muttered the Ashakan woman. "What happened today that she suddenly" she nodded at Aurelia "changes master, and you are allowed access to the secrets of the Powers?"

Alithea popped a date into her mouth and winked playfully at Nebuchadnezzar's eidolus.

"Think about it" she whispered.

Lady Ignatia shook her head.

"When is Shulima sending this letter?"

"Should I tell you the day and hour? Not enough spies? Soon, soon. Hurry up."

The Ashakan woman stood up.

"Esthle" she bowed to the lying Alithea.

Esthle Latek waved her amicably goodbye.

Closing the door behind her, Aurelia approached the Strategos' daughter and knelt down by the pillows.

"Despoina, I wouldn't want her to —"

Esthle Latek rebuked her with an angry look that made the aether of the Hyppyres armband accelerate. Having pushed aside the bowl of dates, the Esthle jumped to her feet, ran to the bureau, bent down, tugged at something under its top, there was a grinding of metal mechanisms, glass panels moved in the walls and ceiling — but the stone wall moved as well. Its fragment behind the bureau receded into the shadow, turning on invisible hinges, and from the shadow emerged one of the guests, a long-haired man in a brown tunic and black shalwars. After casting an astonished glance at the Hyppyres, he bowed to Esthle Latek, who had meanwhile sat down in the armchair and crossed her legs, exposing her ankle and part of her calf. Aurelia, stopped by the movement of Alithea's hand, remained in place. It did not escape her attention that the man had six fingers on each hand.

"Gauer, Gauer, Gauer," Esthle Latek muttered, tapping the complex Pythagorean cube on the arm of the armchair. "You heard it yourself. What am I to do with this?"

"Esthle." Gauer the Babylonian bowed a second time.

"Tell me, rat."

"I am waiting for you to tell me why you let me hear this, Esthle."

"How soon will you get a reply from New Babylon by heliograph?"

"The Seven-Fingers never sleeps. Fifteen hours."

"You will bear witness to Nebuchadnezzar's intentions."

"I will bear witness." He smiled to himself. "Such is my fate."

"What time is it? It is long after midnight."

The Esthle touched her fingernail to her left nostril, squinted at the Babylonian. The pyrokian light fell on her left profile, on her left breast, the classic Alexandrian curve, on her left hip and thigh under the smooth fabric of her skirt; behind her was the dark Mareot and the glow of Alexandria. For a moment Aurelia was not sure whether she saw Alithea or the Evening Maiden. She blinked, once, twice.

"Strategos Berbelek already controls Amida and Pergamon," The Esthle

stated. "Marius the Seleucid will be crowned King of the Fourth Pergamon. Hieronim Berbelek has just received a suitable point of support to move the Earth. Until the armies gather — This is precisely that brief moment, Gauer, — I have an offer for Seven-Fingers: he or Nebuchadnezzar. With whom should Seleucid and Strategos Berbelek ally, and who will fall victim to them and whose country will be torn apart by Pergamon, Axum, Ephrem's Ismailis — and the other one, his enemy and neighbor —Aegypt or Babylon? Let The Seven-Fingers choose."

Gauer shook his head.

"He will never attack the Warlock."

"That's not what I'm asking. I'm asking if he'll swear an oath of neutrality towards Berbelek, if he'll recognize the Kingdom of Pergamon, and if necessary, if he'll send troops to Aegypt. You've heard what the Golden One's condition is for the Allies: the fall of Babylon."

"Yes."

"What: yes?"

"Yes, The Seven-Fingers will swear that oath."

Esthle Latek leaned forward in her chair, toward the eidolon of the Kratistos of Babylon.

"Are you sure?"

"Esthle," Gauer sighed. "I, unfortunately, am always sure."

"When the Warlock falls..."

"If the Warlock falls, Esthle, if."

"If."

"Bah!"

"Yes. Yes. Good."

The Esthle leaned back in her chair.

"There is, however, an additional condition here," she continued.

"I suppose so."

"Really?"

"Speak, Esthle, I must hear."

"After the fall of Nebuchadnezzar, The Seven-Fingered Kratistos, as an ally, neighbor, and main participant in the alliance, will have the decisive voice in the political future of Aegypt; he should have reserved this in advance in the agreement with the Strategos."

"I am listening."

"A new Hypatia will have to be placed on the throne. Babylon will retain the right of veto in her election."

"This new Hypatia is to be — who?"

"Oh, Gauer, Gauer, Gauer, you are looking at her."

The Babylonian smacked his lips loudly, puffed out his cheeks.

"Is that all?"

"Enough!" Alithea laughed.

"Fifteen hours, then, Esthle."

"Go."

He bowed a third time and left.

Aurelia waited patiently. Esthle Latek turned the Pythagorean cube polished by the touch of thousands of fingers in her hand, the silver symbols embossed on its sides flashed in the light of the pyrokian lamps. Pythagoras' cubes remained banned on the Moon, Aurelia had only recently become acquainted with these toys. But were they really just toys? Legend had it that the first cube was designed by Pythagoras himself, but of course no one knew the truth. The cubes, usually made of wood and the size of a child's fist, had the shape of a regular polyhedron, consisting of a dozen or several dozen smaller polyhedrons. Each face of each of them (and, consequently, each face of the main polyhedron in any

configuration) had an assigned number, the sum of smaller numbers describing the edges. As a result, the number of numerological and geometric combinations was extremely large; for each combination there were rich philosophical and religious interpretations. The Pythagoreans of the Post-Alexandrian Era used the cube to train children's minds, to train them for the mental rigor of the sect. In a vulgarized version, devoid of symbolic designations, the cube spread on Earth as a toy for children, a popular puzzle. However, even in this form, when used in systematic exercises, it influenced the morph of the mind. Aurelia knew that some earthly sophistae, especially of the oriental schools, maintained that through many years of mental gymnastics on the Pythagorean cube one could achieve a Form that would allow one to perceive the deepest structure of reality, to see the Number of God.

At last, Esthle Latek tore herself from her reverie and remembered Aurelia. She put the cube aside and nodded at the Ryter.

"I guess you were telling the truth."

"I warned you, Despoina: I'll tell the Strategos everything."

"Oh, but tell him again, tell him again. Didn't I just give him Aegypt and Babylon on a platter? He won't be stingy with this little reward!"

She winked at Aurelia and stood up, stretching like a cat. Aurelia also stood up.

"I have to check on the convalescent," the Esthle muttered, absently looking at the cacomorphic bird in the ceiling ornithorium. "Suddenly this has become a political issue, time to set a wedding date."

She hesitated mid-step, however, and, turning on her heel, returned to Aurelia. Keeping away from the rushing aether surrounding her right, she embraced the Moongirl and kissed her on the left cheek.

"Thank you."

"I really shouldn't have."

"You're not on the Moon. Take this off and go dance. You'll see how many willing partners you'll find: You're the Lady's Ryter — But hasn't it occurred to you that strength is also beauty?"

Y.
On Human Nature and the Flowers of Hyakinthus

A moment before the royal diadem rested on the temples of Marius Seleucidite, a man in the black julbab of the Pilgrim to the Stone broke out of the crowd under the steps of the ziggurat and, rushing past the Horrors and the Pergamon guard, thrust his dagger into the chest of the enthroned Seleucidite. The blade passed through the cloak and tunic, only to recoil, jagged, with a screech from the torso of the Iganazi aristocrat. Marius roared with sand and gravel, and for a moment disappeared entirely behind the desert dust. When it fell, the skeleton of the assassin, skinned and de-muscled, was already rolling down the stone steps. The crowd fell silent.

Here, before Aurelia's eyes, the final triumph was slipping away from the hands of the Strategos Berbelek; the victory on which everything depended was turning into defeat.

In the sky to the west, from the direction of Alexandria and the Mediterranean Sea, more than 2,000 stadia distant from Amida, a front of black clouds was building. The King of Storms had promised the Strategos of the Moon a storm of the century, which would block navigation for at least a month, so that no ships with the armies of the Urals and Macedonia could reach the besieged Pergamon in time — and storm winds were also roaring over Amida, shaking the great banners with the Four Swords, with which the Ziggurat of Eteme-

nankia was thickly hung and the great Attalid Square stretched out beneath it. Now, when everyone held their breath, as in the silence of the eye of a cyclone, one could clearly hear every flap and crackle of fluttering sheets of material, the creaking of spars, the whistle of wind between buildings.

A second, two... This stillness will soon explode, Amida will soon shake from the roar of the furious — deceived, disappointed, terrified, disgusted — Pergamonians; instead of following their master, they will go against him, a wave of angry crowd will rush up the stairs of the ziggurat. Not a monster, not a daimon, not the desert fear that children tremble before, not him they were to see in the holy diadem. Freedom from Babylonian captivity was to be brought to them by a noble and powerful victor, a beautiful aristocrat of high morph — and Marius was that, until his gesometic nature revealed itself. Aurelia, the Horrors, the guard, the royal retinue gathered on the top of the ziggurat, around and behind the back of the crowning Marius — they almost physically felt the Form of the nation breaking on the surrounding keros, the moved boulder tottering and about to fall into the abyss, the echo of the thunder of the future avalanche could already be heard; goosebumps ran across their skin and the blood pounded in their ears.

"Homage!"

They shuddered and at the sharp cry of the Strategos turned their gaze away from the crowd below. Hieronim Berbelek did not wait for them: he approached and knelt before the Seleucidite, hugging him by the knees and pressing his forehead to the stone. Aurelia understood first. She moved to the side, in front of Marius, and knelt down too; the okoknee-guards bit into the granite slab with a piercing screech, fragments flew in all directions. Without lifting her head, Hyppyres saw others kneeling: two Leonidases, seven thousand Horror, then the guards fell like one man before Marius, the wave accelerated — the blink of an eye and they were all kneeling here.

She heard the Strategos's hurried whisper; again she did not understand the words. He whispered to the Iganazi.

Marius put the diadem on his head.

A great commotion was heard across the square, not yet words, but the noise of the movement of a gigantic mass of people — there were at least fifty thousand Amidan gathered there. Aurelia did not know what the sound meant,

towards which morph the crowd leaned, and she had no way of checking, just as none of those kneeling before Marius Seleucidite had. They would have to stand up, look back; and that was precisely what they were not allowed to do. Strategos Berbelek did not know either.

Without rising, he raised his hand in a fist.

"Lord of Stone!" he shouted with all his might. "King of Petra!"

Aurelia repeated after him, sending a flare of pure Fire down her straightened arm. How much air and dust in her lungs:

"Lord of Stone! Lord of Stone!

The Horror and guardsmen obediently took up the cry. She counted the chanted words. The noise of the crowd behind them rose like a tidal wave, higher, higher, higher, until it reached the top of the ziggurat and embraced them with its Form — and suddenly they no longer had to, but wanted, sincerely desired to shout joyfully in rhythm with a thousand throats the triumph of the reborn nation.

For this was the obvious:

"Stone! Stone! Stone! Stone! Stone! Stone!"

"PERGAMON" means "Fortress." Perhaps no city of the former Alexandrian Empire was besieged so often and so fiercely, none was destroyed and rebuilt so many times, and none was so powerfully fortified as a result. After all, whoever conquered it knew best what changes and reinforcements it required for effective defense. Half a century ago, when Pergamon in turn fell into the hands of the Warlock, most of its current buildings were erected, including the double city wall and the gigantic bridge towers on the Kaikus.

The barren plain surrounding the city and the steep hill around which it was built were the scene of so many battles, so many areses and strategoi left their auras here that its keros probably permanently retained the memory of deadly forms. No one lived on the Plain of Blood, no one raised cattle here or cultivated grain. People died young, falling ill with every possible and impossible disease, even casual travelers broke their legs and arms on a straight path, cracked

their skulls by tripping over the strap of their own sandals, animals attacked everything that moved furiously, and plants grew prickly and poisonous, if at all.

The governor of Pergamon paid a high salary to the teknitoi of the Kalokagathia, if only they would agree to live within the walls; thanks to this, it was possible to live there. Recently, Pergamon even began to regain its fame as a center of sophistry and medicine. It was here that the teknites zoonu Barluk Meshuva bred his earth-eating gewols, and here in the year 1174 PUR a Hippocratic demiurgoi soma first removed and inserted a heart and lungs from a living man into a living man. Since the fall of the Seleucid Empire and the partition of the Third Kingdom, the border of the lands and anthos of the Warlock and the Seven-Fingers ran 1,000 stadia east of Pergamon. After the abolition of customs, trade between the Urals, Macedonia, and Babylon increased twice-fold; a large part of it went through the ports of the Kaftor Sea and overland from the Tigris, Euphrates, and Marath, along the route that passed through Pergamon. It was a rich city.

Aurelia Kruzos saw it for the first time at dusk on the fourteenth of Junius from inside the head of the *Urkaj*, when the madly whirling scorpion of Uncle Omixos descended the steep arc over the camp of The Horror spread out on the Plain of Blood. She saw Pergamon in ruins. The city lay in ruins, and what had not yet been reduced to rubble was burning: from the ruins rose great columns of dark smoke visible from afar, the very sky was the color of ash. However, Pergamon still resisted, still fought, the golden Quadruple Sword did not flap over it.

The Strategos had not planned a simultaneous assault in the east and west — Pergamon was to be cut off for the first campaign only, so as not to interfere with the occupation of the southern lands — but this sudden political about-face, giving a chance for an alliance with Babylon, forced Berbelek to divide his forces much more and attack from the march; such opportunities were not to be missed. However, he could not be in two places at once, Amida was more important, the heart of the reborn state, the home of the Seleucids, Amida he had wrested from the Seven-fingers. Now he came to take the Keep; to take it and fortify it as quickly as possible against the Warlock's troops approaching to relieve him. They would come, whether or not Seven-Fingers chose to honor the hastily concluded alliance.

For when he saw that he had strength — that despite Esthle Latek's declarations, Pergamon was defending itself —what good would it do him to keep his word? Honor, Aurelia's father had said, was what men had received from the gods instead of true power. You can only keep or lose honor with someone your equal. No one in their right mind would expect honorable behavior from a doulos or a kratistos. Toward the stronger we behave as his Form allows us; to the weaker we determine the Form of behaviour ourselves. A dog may be grateful to you and you may be gracious to a dog, but it is impossible to swear an oath to a dog.

The *Understar* spat out its passengers behind the main southern rampart. A makeshift mooring mast was erected here for air pigs. Not counting the Oroneian *Cloudbreaker*, the Strategos Berbelek had four aerostats. He used them to transport people, supplies and weapons, especially the heavy pyresiders of The Horror, the Hundred-Litho wall-breakers were eagerly awaited. All four aerostats had to be purchased, because no one would undertake to insure them for war operations. The gold came from the Labyrinth, but officially they now belonged to the Njute, Ikita & Berbelek Merchant House. That same evening and at night, by the light of fires and torches, two pigs moored, bringing another hundred of Horror (Second Salic Column; they had just transferred to Amida) from Amida and supplies of bullets and pyros from the Kaftorian and Alexandrian NIB warehouses. The thunder of the pyresiders did not cease.

The thunder of the pyresiders did not cease, the earth shook from the explosions of powerful pyros charges. Aurelia went around all the positions from which the Fortress was being fired. Such pyresiders and siege engines were not known on the Moon, there was never a need to conduct sieges there, there was one anthos, one Lady, and the anaires did not build fortifications. Meanwhile, The Horror's pyresiders were the most powerful machines of destruction known to man, and to move and direct them towards their targets, behemoths and ten-stringed cattle were used. Metal barrels, thirty or more pous long, turned on bearings that creaked with every vibration like cracking ice. The metal was carved with the symbols of the cyphers of pyrosic mixtures, the use of which a given pyresider could withstand. The largest, hundred-lithos, were marked with cyphers of the highest alkimic permutations, prepared especially for The Horror by the Pythagoreans of Southern Herdon:

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Only they carried so far and with such force. There was something almost purinic about the pyr, and after each time it was ignited, when the air vibrated with the thunder running over the plain, and the site was surrounded by a gray cloud of aerial burning, squeezing sour tears from her eyes — each time Aurelia was then pierced by a shiver of some primal, inhuman delight, incomparable to anything she had experienced so far. This pyr, she thought, what pyr ignition — the arche of Fire in my veins and muscles also awaken and also want to explode, to enter the Form of this alkymic transmutation. Is this what the death of Hyppyres looks like, which they told me so much about: fftrruk! — and a handful of ash remains? Is this how we leave, in the ecstasy of Fire...?

She decided to stay away from those pyresiders, not to expose herself to the terrible temptation, she returned to the main camp. Here she remained an anonymous member of the Strategos' retinue, dozens, hundreds of people passed through the camp every hour, every now and then someone would gallop in on a foaming horse or zebra and force their way into the Strategos' tent, similarly there was a bustle around the tents of the leonidases of the individual Columns of Horror. She counted five of them, probably the largest gathering of Horror soldiers in that century, if not since the Kratistos Wars. As far as the eye could see — identical soldiers with identical movements, in identical carbon-black armor, and no matter who she spoke to, they would answer in the same way, with the same accent. They had surrounded the city with a tight ring for a dozen or so days now. The siege lasted the entire time that the Strategos marched with The Horror's Alexandrian landing party to Amida, when he captured key strongholds, bridges and the eastern pass, the Babylonian occupation zone, where Marius was crowned in Amida and quickly organized the structures of the new state.

From the platform of the mooring mast, where the barrage from the Fortress could not reach, Strategos Berbelek now watched The Horror's progress; Aurelia climbed after him. On that first evening after their arrival, on the fourth of Junius, the third tower of Pergamon was destroyed; four remained, two Selinian and two Cecius. Two hundred stadia to the west, in the harbor at the mouth of the Kaikus, a fleet of flat-bottomed scaffold boats waited, ready to attack the Western Kaikus once the rescue tower had fallen.

The fall of the tower looked like the fall of a tree, it was cut down with one accurate blow of a hundred-lithos cone at the base of the building: tilting very slowly, it outlined a majestic arc in the air, just before reaching the ground it fell into pieces like a child's toy. However, when it hit, it shook as if under the fist of Hephaistos.

"This is how the power of the Warlock falls," Esthlos Berbelek muttered, removing the opticum from his eyes.

"Don't be happy, you'll have to rebuild it soon." Janna-z-Gniezno spat over her shoulder. "I know one thing: you can never, never be certain on which side of the barricade you'll end up." Here she winked at Aurelia. "Take the current governor of Pergamon as an example. We have already sent him various proposals, but he will defend himself to the end. Once he was the leader of the rebel movement. He betrayed his men and the Widower made him governor of Pergamon as a reward. He knows that no guarantees from above will ensure his survival now." Janna spat for the second time. "What a world, dear God, even scumbags don't pay anymore."

That night, looking from the mast of the aerostats at the ring of campfires of Berbelek's troops stretching stadia around the walls of Pergamon — as far as the eye could see, to the dark horizon — and at the dirty red glow over the shelled city — smoke obscured the stars above the Kaikus — that night Aurelia was convinced that the siege of the Fortress would look the same as the siege of Kolenica, only on a proportionally larger scale and would last proportionally longer. However, in the few months that had passed since Kolenica, a change had occurred that the Moongirl had somehow missed — perhaps she was too close to the Strategos Berbelek, or perhaps the change had come too slowly — and of all the Strategos' men, it was Aurelia Kruzos who was surprised the most.

On the sixteenth of Junius, all four surviving bridge towers fell. The Horror's pyresiders struck with inhuman precision, Berbelek's cannoneers systematically massacred the face of the city, chipping away at large chunks of the central hill. The southern and eastern outer walls were completely demolished. In the evening, the First Byzantine Column under the Leonidas Preruga took the Gates of The Kaikus in a violent attack from land and water. The Horror was moving to new positions behind the fortifications on the terraced slopes of the Caucasian Valley. Hieronim Berbelek sent a herald with a proposal for

the honorable surrender of Pergamon; he was shot when he rode up to the gate. At night, however — by the river and through breaches in the fallen walls — the Pergamonites themselves began to flee from the siege. Suddenly, they all turned out to be staunch supporters of the Seleucids. They were questioned about the numbers, disposition, and armament of the defenders, about supplies, and morale.

On the seventeenth of Junius, the Strategos Berbelek rode around Pergamon several times from the direction of the eastern tributary of the Kaikus, the Cetius. The defenders must have seen Berbelek — with him rode a standard-bearer with the Red Locust. Horrified shouts were raised, horns were blown. Three swift assaults followed: east, east, southeast. The inter-wall area was taken by evening. The *Urkaj* fell from the sky onto the surviving positions of the Pergamon pyresiders, the strike of the aetherial scorpion's tail shattered metal and stone. The Horror mekanica began digging for the inner walls. After dusk, the first units of the newly formed Fourth Army of Pergamon arrived. Strategos Berbelek ordered them to set up a large camp north of the city, each man was to light one fire.

On the night of the seventeenth to the eighteenth, the assault began from the west, all three Columns of Horror — in the glow of countless torches, in the constant cannonade of Herdonian multi-barrel keraunets, over the waters of the Kaikus burning from the alkalinic poisons poured into them, under hundreds of red-black-white banners of Horror, under dozens of banners of honorary ares, in such an intensity of deadly auras that people's hearts broke, blood gushed from their ears and noses, flowed from their eyes, and the last defenders of the Fortress died on its walls from pure terror. The night was dark, muggy, the storms had retreated from the Mediterranean Sea, ash was floating in the air, the hot hell of the burning city only thickened the surrounding darkness. The graphite armor of the Horror, woven from hydro-geous cyphers, in whose soft plates bullets and shrapnel fragments were stuck, melted the soldiers into dull darkness. A single, long, quivering roar rolled uninterruptedly over the ground, drowning out even the roars of the behemoths. The hundred-lithos bombs struck above the heads of the attackers, pyros bombs fell from the *Urkaj* circling the Fortress, the makina crashed against the walls, the walls crashed against the makina. The iron morph of The Horror embraced every attacker, including the volunteers under the banner of the Seleucidite, no one retreated, it was impossible to retreat, retreat was unthinkable, defeat was unthinkable, only victory was possible — Hieronim Berbelek climbed towards Pergamon on

the back of a brown gebehemoth, encompassing the battlefield with his gaze and anthos — only victory was possible.

The dawn of the eighteenth Junius saw Pergamon under the banners of the Four Sword and the Locust, with the head of the Ural governor hanging from the southern tower; the pyresiders and keraunets were silent, the camps on the Plain of Blood were being packed, the black ranks of The Horror were pouring into the city — Pergamon fell.

The *Urkaj* carried the news of victory to Amida; she returned immediately with an envoy from Marius, the newly appointed chancellor of The Lord of Stone. The Strategos had just finished receiving homage from the Pergamon aristocracy and welcomed the chancellor into the audience chamber of the miraculously preserved governor's palace, on a burning chair made of phoenix bones, with the Leonidases of Horror on the right, with Aurelia in full Hyppyres armor on the left, surrounded by the Horror Obol, with a captured rykta inlaid with phoenix eyes in her hand.

The form of the moment forced the chancellor to genuflect.

"Esthlos."

"Speak."

"Congratulations and honors from King Marius the Seleucidite. The people celebrate at the news of the recovery of the ancient capital. Yesterday evening, Esthlos Sayheed the Fifth of the Katribites arrived at Amida with plenipotentiary powers from New Babylon."

"The Seven-Fingered Kratistos asks about the time and place of negotiations on a detailed peace treaty between Babylon and the Fourth Pergamon."

"That remains at the king's discretion."

"Yes, Esthlos. However, Sayheed the Katribite also asks about the terms of a new division of the keros. Marius Petra would like to know under whose anthos the Fourth Pergamon will ultimately be placed. Kratista Jezebel the Merciful has been dead for forty years. The Seven-Fingered Kratistos asks: should he negotiate directly with Kratistos of the Horn? Will there be a new war for the keros? Who will live in the Floreum of Pergamon?"

The tradition of the Second and Third Pergamons moved the king beyond the direct influence of the Kratista, unlike, for example, in Aegypt, where Hypathia lived only a dozen or so stadia from Nebuchadnezzar's tower, or in Franconia, where the Kratistos Leo Vialle visited the royal court every now and then — but already in Jazirat al'-Arab the princes of the desert wandered with their tribes along and beyond the borders of Ephrem's crown. Similarly here: The Seleucids resided in Amida, the Kratista — in Pergamon.

In fact, it was the anthos of Jezebel the Gentle, Jezebel the Merciful and Forgiving that was blamed for the defeat of the Seleucids and the partition of the Third Kingdom. If the local aristocrats had not been softened by the tolerant morph of the Kratista, they would not have succumbed to the invaders, and most likely would not have provoked the invasion with their weakness in the first place. It is no wonder that Jezebel fled and eventually died alone (allegedly her heart broke with despair). What a Kratista, what a contradiction in Power: the power of weakness. Aurelia was content to compare her to Illeia. The Witch is not powerful because she is cruel, but cruelty is an attribute of power. Jezebel did not draw conclusions from the example of Kristos, whose mercy clearly exceeded all boundaries of madness, the disease of the Morph. Those who forgive should be capable of the greatest cruelty if necessary.

However, Aurelia immediately saw the further implications of the Chancellor's question. Because what does it matter that they have seized lands, when the morph of the occupiers is still the strongest reflection in the keros? The Kingdom of Pergamon is not an inconspicuous country like Neurgia, which can balance endlessly on the border of great anthoses.

A few hours earlier, as they rode through the streets of the city in the cold dawn, Aurelia had watched the Pergamonites, as if cheering for the conquerors and waving the colors of the Seleucids. The former Amidans cheered even more enthusiastically in the Square of Attilis — all with six fingers on their hands. If that much is visible in their bodies, what is left of the Warlock in the minds of the Pergamonians? The Form of the occupier must be eradicated from the nation. However, how can this be done if the Crystal Floreum remains empty and the crowns of the Seven-Fingers and the Warlock continue to clash in the keros of the country?

One can of course voluntarily surrender to one of them, and since the Widower is out of the question...

However, there was one more possibility.

No one is born a strategos, no one is born a victor and a tyrant — and not all kratistoi are born a kratistos.

"Kyrios" whispered Aurelia, leaning over the shoulder of Esthlos Berbelek "This is a conspiracy of Seven-Fingers and the Warlock, they want to bind you to Pergamon, so that you will no longer—"

The Strategos looked at her and she fell silent.

He nodded to the chancellor.

"In a few days, I will return to Amida and discuss this matter personally with Marius. In any case, he can be sure that his kingdom will no longer remain under the morph of the occupiers. Now, if you will excuse me, I have urgent matters to attend to here. Aurelia, with me."

He walked out quickly to the atrium at the back of the palace.

"You're forgetting yourself!" He growled at the Ryter, stopping there under a water palm tree. "I didn't bring you to Earth to give me political advice!"

She clenched her fists — So that the swollen epicycles howled in their rush — She clenched her fists and didn't give in to the Strategos' anger.

"Why did you take me, Esthlos? So that I could stand by your side and sanction your every decision in the name of the Lady with my silent presence — So that they would think that the Lady sanctioned them? I won't do that! If you intend to betray her—"

Hieronim Berbelek laughed.

Aurelia burst into flames.

"Sir! I beg you!"

With a dismissive wave of his hand, the Strategos perched on the marble wall surrounding the impluvium. Small red fish swam in the pool; he watched their dances thoughtfully for a moment.

"Calm down," he muttered to the Moongirl. "Where did you even get this

idea of betrayal?"

"Do you think I don't see it? Everyone can see it now! You are The Strategos of the Moon, you should take care of the Moon. Didn't Hierokharis tell you? Even I know from the gossip on the *Understar*: the Adynatos tried to land on the Other Side again. The Lady gave you gold, the Lady gave you an army, the Lady gave you power to kill The Arretes' Kratistos. What are you doing?"

"What am I doing?" He raised an eyebrow. He stirred the impluvium's water with his left hand.

"The Warlock — I understand, you have to unite them somehow, convince them to Illeia, turn them against the Twist. But you're not even seriously thinking about attacking the Urals, are you? Let alone the Aetherian war! You're just taking advantage of —"

"Oh! May I ask where that conclusion comes from?"

"Janna enlightened me" Aurelia snorted sarcastically. "Any man strong enough to kill Kratistos, especially Adynatos,' is also strong enough to carve out some power on Earth comparable to Kratistos'."

"That's true."

"So why should he give it up? Now Marius sends a chancellor and openly asks you to become the protector of the Fourth Pergamon. In fact, you already are, without your Horror it will not survive even a month. Did you really think that this spectacle in Amida would fool anyone? By paying homage to Marius, you crowned him! Kyrios!"

The Strategos raised his eyes. In the passage behind the colonnade of the atrium, the palace doulos were crowded; under Berbelek's gaze they hastily retreated. The Esthlos pointed with a wet hand to the inscription carved on the arch above the entrance to the representative part of the palace. *Ethos anthropou daimon.*

"A man's character is his fate. I wonder why our former governor allowed this wisdom of Heraclitus to be preserved here. It worked beautifully in his case. What do you think, Aurelia, is this really so? A man's character is his fate."

Aurelia clearly felt the Strategos drawing her into the form of a trivial,

friendly chat. She couldn't help it; how could she respond to such words with a scream? That would be senseless hysteria.

"I don't know," she mumbled.

"You have a good heart, a strong character. What are you afraid of? Act as your nature commands you."

Through the open impluvium he looked at the pale gray sky, covered with dark streaks of smoke.

"It's not noon yet. Take off this armor, the official part is over. Let's go for a walk through the city, call Obol."

"Kyrios..."

"What, should I swear an oath to you?"

She shook her head.

"No, I know there can be no honor between us. As long as I can believe you, I have to believe you."

He laughed again. Having caught one of the fish, he looked at it, panically fluttering in his hand.

"The Lady will reward you."

THE statue of Arena Polias lay in a puddle of oily mud, covered at knee height; Athena also had no head. On the charred body of the goddess sat a Horror in a torn coal breastplate and, helping with her teeth, she bandaged her right hand with her left hand. At the sight of the Strategos she rose to salute, the bandage falling into the mud. Esthlos Berbelek pointed to the incandescent roar down the hill, to the ruins of the gymnasium, over which clouds of black smoke still rose.

"The infirmary has been moved there."

The portico of the Library of Pergamon was almost two-thirds destroyed, only the columns furthest from the Holy Circle were still standing. Or rather

from what the Holy Circle had been transformed into under the anthos of the Warlock: a square with a fountain and several sculptures in the middle of the administrative complex. To the north of the square was the main building of the Library of Pergamon, to the west — the temple of Athena, behind which semicircles of stone steps descended down a wide slope to the city. The temple of Athena had housed the militia offices during the rule of the Urals. All that remained of them was a pile of charred rubble: one of those hastily prepared *Urkaj* bombs had fallen here. Most of the oldest part of the Library, built during the Attalids of Alexandria, had survived in only slightly better condition. Esthlos Berbelek wanted to enter through the western portico and came across a pile of rubble piled high above his head. Everything here was wet, slippery from the dirty damp, water was collecting in the cracks of the slabs.

They walked around the colonnade.

“What else, maybe you could help better than... Aaa! What’s the matter?”

A dozen or so people were carrying piles of books and parchment scrolls outside, the doulos were arranging them in the courtyard. The man in charge of the operation, a tall old man of Byzantine morph, first saw the Horrors accompanying the Strategos (Berbelek had taken four soldiers with him), only then the Strategos himself. He didn’t know him, but of course he recognized the morph. He bowed stiffly.

“Esthlos. What’s the matter?”

“Are you Meton Mesyta?”

“Yes.”

“I’m urgently looking for certain texts, your library has copies of them. Who manages the catalogues?“

“As you can see, Esthlos, this is not the best time... The upper warehouses burned down, the basements are flooded... We spent the whole night putting out fires, and what the fire didn’t destroy, the water did. We don’t know yet how much we’ll be able to save. If it weren’t for the constant storms from the sea, everything would have burned down. The reconstruction of the Library itself —“

”Don’t worry about that, we probably won’t rebuild the city at all. But

surely —“

“What?”

“Surely you can point me to a man —”

“What are you doing?! Step aside!“

This, in turn, was not addressed to the Strategos, but to Aurelia, who had in the meantime moved away from the conversation and, wandering between the uneven barricades of books and scrolls (crates of clay tablets and drums of rotten fabrics were also brought out here), came across the original Roman Scriptures of Provega and the complete comedies of Ligaion in a Greek edition. Leaning down, she began to leaf through them. A subconscious spark must have jumped from her hand, because the paper of one of the volumes from the neighboring stack began to burn. She stepped back hastily.

A bearded Babylonian ran up with a wet rag in his hand and extinguished the flame.

”What are you thinking?” he growled from the depths of his matted, partially burnt beard. ”To come here with a fire after all this! Throw out that tobacco!“

Before leaving the palace, Aurelia had taken off her armor, following Esthlos Berbelek’s instructions. From the palace wardrobe, she chose a colorful Indian skirt, decently long, but tied low on the hips. Remembering Alithea’s advice, she also found a few useless but beautiful accessories: a necklace that brightly reflected the shiny silver from the dark skin, loose gypsy bracelets, blue basilisk-skin toe-shoes. Making silly faces at the mirror, she finally tied an Axumian turban, red as Midas wine, around her head. Who was she now? A disguise or that which was disguised? What disguise did she wear in her nakedness? Who would she remain after the body was taken away? Perhaps they were right in calling her the Ash Lady, because ash would be her final Form. We don’t really know our own morph until we clash it with an alien morph.

”I don’t smoke,” she muttered.

The bearded man seemed to no longer pay attention to her; half-turned, he exchanged angry shouts with the other librarians in a language unknown to Aurelia. She took a closer look at him. He was younger than she had judged at first glance; his dirty tunic, tousled hair, and singed skin effectively disguised

him. Judging by the ruble signet ring on his sixth finger and Berbelek's angry expression in the presence of the Strategos, he could even be an aristocrat.

"Specifically Ludwig the Hun's *Winter's Tale*," Esthlos Hieronim explained to Meton Mesyta in the meantime. "The part containing an account of the wedding and marriage of Maksym Rog. There is also a poem by Abasha Mścisłowicz dealing with this, sometimes included in the *Winter's Tale*. In addition, a preprovego version of the legend of Isidore of Rhodes; at that time it was not yet considered a legend, Thucydides the Second gave an account of the murder of the Kratistos Peter the Acanthus as a historical fact. I know that in addition to the Glory of Thucydides, it is mentioned in the Chersonese Memoirs — I hear you have a full edition of them."

"Esthlos..."

"Point out the man."

"We haven't reached the sections of ancient history yet. Right now —"

"I'll go myself."

"You'll start a fire, Esthlos, really —"

"Now. Aurelia, stay."

The Strategos threw her a lunar pyrykte (she caught it in the air above the wall of books, stopping herself at the last moment from making a fiery swing of her arm), grabbed Meton by the elbow and pulled him into the Library's storage rooms. The Horror followed them.

The bearded man measured Aurelia with a long look from under furrowed brows. Pressing the hot rykte to her side, she carefully withdrew from the labyrinth of parchment and paper, until she finally stood on the shattered slabs of the Holy Circle, behind the ruined portico of the Library. The Babylonian, wiping his hands on a rag and throwing it into a puddle, stepped after the girl.

"Aurelia, yes?" He must have smiled, that's how the wrinkles formed on his charred face; because the beard hid the rest, one could only guess. "Don't be afraid, we're just screaming like that."

Did she really give the impression of a frightened girl? She smiled mutely in

response.

He held out his hand to her. She gave him hers. Then he surprised her, leaning down and kissing the inside of her wrist.

“Esthlos Kykur Ashamader. It’s not a fever, is it? I heard that a plague has appeared in the city, too many teknitoi soma have died. Let’s go from this ruin, I can’t stand the stench any more; what was supposed to burn, burned, ancient stones remain. Esthle. Please.“

“I should wait —”

“It will take them a while. Please.“

They sat down on the top step of the stairs behind the ruins of Athena’s temple.

”Here, Herdonian blend.” Kykur’s tobacco was already two-thirds empty. ”We can smoke here, Esthle.”

”I don’t smoke,” she repeated, both childishly excited and frightened by the fact that he mistook her for an aristocrat, —and she didn’t deny it.

”Mhm, I thought you were blowing smoke.”

”I—”

”Look, the northern aqueduct has collapsed.” After lighting his tobacco, he pointed it to the right, to the districts of the wealthy. From there, too, black columns rose into the sky; fires raged throughout Pergamon.

They were on the top of a hill, almost two stadia above the river. A grim panorama stretched out before them: a ruined city, like a field of bare bones, architectural stumps sticking out of the mud, the scarred earth, the crumbled street pavement. Beyond the jagged ring of fortifications — the Plain of Blood, which was not the color of blood at all, but of ash. Even the waters of Kaikus did not stand out in a lighter color.

The wind from the west persisted (the sea had still not calmed down after the paroxysms of the Storm King’s aura), bringing the greasy stench of death and burning to the hill of Athena. The rumor of the plague was true, Aurelia knew that the Strategos had ordered the corpses to be burned on the eastern

side beyond the river. There were of course casualties among the victors, The Horror will probably open a new recruitment here — but the defenders and civilians suffered incomparably more. Moreover, in the anthos of the Warlock it was usually difficult to distinguish civilians at all, closer to the Urals there was such great obedience that at the hegemon's command everyone took up arms against the invader, men, women and children, old and mad. At least the armed underground or urban guerrillas did not cause any trouble later: after defeat was once foretold they surrendered with equal discipline.

However, the smoke of those pyres was lost behind the smoke of the still burning fires. The dense development of Pergamon, especially its poorer districts, where the main material was wood, made it impossible to quickly stop the already raging fire. Between the crooked pillars of scorch, Aurelia saw the *Urkaj* circling the city: the moons in the aetherial scorpion were observing the shifts of the flame front and were providing up-to-date information to the headquarters of the Median Column, to which the Strategos had entrusted the fight against the fire.

Fire, fire, fire, I shouldn't be thinking about it all the time. I am a beautiful aristocrat from the retinue of Berbelek the Conqueror, I am an Earthling, I don't know fire. Ugh!

" ...that he has a young daughter and —"

"What did you say?"

"But I don't see the resemblance, different morphs, though."

"Oh, no, Alithea stayed in Alexandria."

"I thought so. But he probably told you what he intended, didn't he? About not rebuilding the city — is that a joke?"

Ah, so that's what he's after: he's trying to get the Strategos's secrets out of me.

"You're a Babylonian, Esthlos, you haven't lived here long, what are you doing in the Library of Pergamon?"

Kykur made a complicated gesture with his hand holding the tobacco.

“My family sent me. Dynastic complications at the court in New Babylon, and as a sophistes in exile I’m no bother to anyone. You know how it is. We did a lot of business in Pergamon — and I have no idea what to do now. Run away? The Warlock will demand his own. Maybe the most sensible thing to do really — “

“Did you hear what texts he asked about?”

“The Strategos?” Kykur looked at Aurelia. “Mhm, what are you suggesting?”

She shrugged.

“Don’t you read the newspapers? Or maybe they don’t write about it under the Widower. This is not a war to regain the lands of the Seleucids; it’s part of a great campaign against the Warlock, an alliance of the kratistoi and the kings of Europe, Asia and Africa was formed. Run away, Esthlos, you should be safe in Babylon.“

“The Seven-Fingers, after all —”

”Not anymore.“ She placed the pyrykte on her thighs, the glowing eyes of the ash birds glanced at her from between the floral patterns of her skirt. “The newspapers will write about it tomorrow.”

“Ahh.” He inhaled the smoke, looked at Aurelia more closely. “Are you interested in politics, Esthle?”

“What do you mean?” she snorted. “I’m interested in the world. Only slaves, madmen and the suicidal don’t care about politics — they don’t care how they live.“

“I wanted to say...” Where do you come from, actually, I can’t recognize that accent. “If you’ll forgive my curiosity, Esthle.“

She touched her lower lip with a blue finger.

“Well, here you go, a real riddle, guess, Esthlos.”

He narrowed his left eye.

“What’s the reward if I guess correctly?”

“Ha, what’s it to me if you don’t guess?”

“Never is beauty more painful than in times of war and destruction. Have you visited the Crystal Floreum, Esthle? I checked, it survived. After dusk, the Jezebel Mists dissipate, you’ve never seen anything like it. You won’t leave the city before evening, will you?“

Then Aurelia had a revelation: he’s trying to seduce her!

She burst out laughing.

The tobacco fell from between Kykur’s fingers. With wide eyes, he watched the sparks dying on Aurelia’s skin, the smoke dissipating from in front of her face.

Suppressing her laughter, she leaned toward him, squeezed his arm. He flinched.

”I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have. I’m not an aristocrat. Aurelia Kruzos, Ryter of Fire, Ryter of Illeia the Cruel. Yes, the Moon Witch. Come on, I’m sorry, I’m sorry.”

“But” he took a deep breath and laughed too “Oh, you’re welcome! From the Moon, right? You won, I would never have guessed. Although on the other hand, Elking really did write... Ah, but what exactly did you wish for as a reward, Esthle?”

“I’m saying that I’m not —“

“That’s interesting, because I’d give my head, hmm, tell me, can a doulos pretend to be a free man in front of truly free people? He wouldn’t be a doulos. But I wanted something else —“

They turned around at the sudden sound of spitting behind their backs. Three steps higher, a tall Ismaili in a black burnoose, one of those desert warriors brought under Berbelek’s command by Marius Seleucidite, crouched on his heels. His face was almost completely covered by a dirty trouffa wrapped in many layers, only his blue eyes glinting in the gap. His black turban was askew, greasy hair sticking out from under it. On his knees, the Ismaili had placed an old keraunet with a very long barrel, covered with matte inlays, here and there forming Arabic words. The hilt of a kanjar protruded from behind his breast

pocket. The man was reaching there to pull out and press dried leaves of some plant into his mouth between the turbans of the trouffa. After chewing them, he spat loudly. His hands were heavily tattooed, with the fingernails of his thumbs morphed into horny claws.

Esthlos Ashamader nodded silently to Aurelia. They climbed back to the Sacred Circle, bypassing the black Bedouin.

Kykur took Aurelia by the arm. She resisted the impulse to free her hand. His skin was so cold... She ran her fingers along his forearm, pressed the muscle, feeling the shape of the bone beneath — now she was leading him, his stride matching hers. They were the same height.

"... it is still dangerous on the streets, but I don't walk alone, I've brought people here to help save the Library, and if you want — Urcz! Zabachai — if you're not leaving today, Esthle, and you're not leaving?"

"No, I don't think so, I don't think so."

"You have no idea what happened here during the siege, I would be very pleased to have your company for just this one evening, you'll see, after a bath and in clean clothes I'll start to resemble a human being. You'll tell me everything about the Moon, maybe I'll even believe you, ha!"

"You won't believe it, but that's better."

"Well then! The Selinus Hospice lies in ruins, I live in a friend's manor, under the northern reservoirs. Where are you —"

"In the governor's palace."

"Ah! Right." Having stopped at the ruins of the Library's portico, he raised Aurelia's hand to his lips. The bracelets jingled. Pressing his lips to her hot wrist, he didn't take his gaze off the Moon's eyes. "But your heart is beating fast."

"Don't flatter yourself, our blood always runs faster."

"It will speed up even more."

They were both smiling now. The lighter the tone and the more playful the words, the more truth in the smile and the morphology of the body. Now

the decisive thing is a short blink, a half-breath, the rustle of silk and a ray of sunlight trembling on the curve of her breasts.

“He won’t be jealous?” he whispered.

“Who?”

“The Strategos.”

“Maybe.”

“I like it when they are jealous.”

“You know what, you better wash up first.”

“As soon as —”

They burst out from behind the ruin, out of breath: two men of the same soldierly morph, equally tarred, even their jib similarly torn and muddy.

“You called us, Esthlos?”

The form burst like a soap bubble, Kykur and Aurelia stepped away from each other, extinguished their smiles, Ashamader let go of the Moonwoman’s hand, turned to the men.

“Where have you been?” he growled.

“The ceiling collapsed in —”

“Never mind. We’re going back to Shigeda. Marduk, how do you look like that!

“Esthlos, you yourself —“

Kykur glared at them.

“Now it’s hard to believe” he said to Aurelia “but not long ago they served in the Grey Guard of the Seven-Fingers. They came here to treat a friend at the Pergamon teknitoi. They owe much to the Ashamaders.”

Aurelia tapped her pyrykte on a fallen column.

”But first I must speak to the Strategos. Forgive me, Esthlos.“

Kykur peered out from behind a bend in the rubble into the courtyard of the Library and waved at Aurelia. They followed him.

Strategos Berbelek was discussing something there with Meton Mesite. Two of the Horrors were hugging thick bundles of books tied with ropes. Seeing Aurelia and Esthlos Ashamader, Meton pointed them out to the Strategos.

Berbelek gave a short order to the Horrors and approached Aurelia. She returned the pyrykte to him. Berbelek's gaze shifted from the Moonwoman to the Babylonian and back again. He raised an eyebrow. Was the Form so obvious? Aurelia smiled uncertainly and clapped her hand against her thigh.

Kykur opened his mouth, but under the Strategos' gaze, he fell silent before saying the first word. Berbelek slammed his rykte against his jugra boot and walked away. As he walked away, he glanced over his shoulder at Ashamader's filthy men, once, twice, and a third time.

Kykur exhaled loudly, then with a theatrical gesture wiped the sweat from his forehead, smearing gray ash across his face in the process.

"Well, since we've been through this, from now on we can only be lucky. Will you allow me, Esthle?" Then he turned to Urcza and Zabachai. "If they've stolen those horses in the meantime, I'll tear their heads off. By the way, you'll have to explain to me sometime how our steadfast victor knows a couple of such riffraff as you."

They looked at each other, bewildered.

"We've never seen him before, Esthlos. Surely we wouldn't forget."

"HYAKINTHUS, a youth of many virtues and extraordinary beauty, was known for his attributes throughout Lakadaemon. He aroused ardent feelings among both mortals and immortals; Apollo himself couldn't resist his charm. Friendship and love between a mortal and a god, even if true, are never safe for a mortal. It happened that Hyakinthus and Apollo were showing off their skill in throwing the discus to each other. Hyakinthus threw it high and far, but the god threw it even further. The youth, wanting to repeat the throw as soon as possible and impress his lover, ran to the place where the discus fell. It, having fallen, bounced off the ground at such an angle that it hit Hyakinthus

in the temple. Hyakinthus fell with his head smashed. From the blood gushing from the wound grew petals of flowers; the keros buckled under the weight of the god's despair and stains of bloody red entered permanently into the morph of those plants. Look. That is why we call them that.

"Beautiful."

"Please. Do not burn them by accident."

"Thank you."

"In another version of the legend, Zephyrus, jealous of Hyakinthos, caused a fatal change in the disc's flight path with a sudden gust of wind. Mhm, do you know why I told you?"

"Oh, I guess. Everyone tells it, Janna the loudest: no mortal has ever come out well in collusion with the Powers, let him not commit suicide for the Lady's plan, and so on and so forth. You next, Kykur?"

"No, no, I'm worried about you, not about Strategos Berbelek, what do I care about him. You say he likes you, that he respects you, that you've become friends with his daughter — It is possible. I believe that it is. In the end, however."

"In the end they mourn us poetically, and our blood seeps into the earth."

"I am a Ryter!"

"I know, you keep repeating it, as if you were afraid to forget yourself. Because after all, you are Aurelia first and foremost; if only you had the will, you would break out of this Form —"

"Get Away!"

He jumped back, those flames were really burning, the sleeves of his shirt, not even buttoned yet, were smouldering.

"So yes! I understand." He looked around the flowery meadow. Finding a quivering curtain of colored light, he approached and immersed himself in the rainbow, until the right part of his body dissolved in it. Squinting, he looked back at Aurelia. "I shouldn't have doubted when you said you weren't an aristocrat. You're not." Here he sneezed mightily. "You gave me a cold"

he mumbled, wiping his nose "you're giving me a fever." He smiled crookedly. "Then I'll be shivering with cold all day." He looked around the meadow for the last time. "Someday the fiery Aurelias will grow here." Having said that, he disappeared into the rainbow.

Aurelia didn't quite raise her gaze to Kykur. She was sitting on the ground with her legs crossed, twirling hyakinths in her fingers. Butterflies danced over the endlessly stretching sunny meadow. One landed on her skull, blue wings spread over her smooth, dark skin. Aurelia sniffed a picked flower. The ones growing around her were crushed and burned, the Hyppyres had just made love here with a Babylonian aristocrat. Ashamader paid the Floreum curators dearly, not only to let him in at any time of day or night, but mainly to ignore these minor vandalisms. She didn't think for a moment that he had brought her here first.

She laughed quietly to herself — to Hyakinthos — remembering how eagerly Kykur had asked her about the details of life on the Moon. She was certain that he would change and embellish them when he talked about them, about her. Because he would talk; she saw how, listening, he savored these future satisfactions, she saw that satiated smile that was not directed at her. He couldn't help himself.

The thing was that she too could not stop herself. She could have flown with the Strategos to Amida, but she preferred to stay in ruined Pergamon, to wallow in the joyful desire of an earthly aristocrat. Whatever he saw in her, it was something completely different than she had seen in herself so far. Aurelia's satisfactions would perhaps not be more noble, but they would be no less satisfying.

Tying her Aegyptian skirt, Aurelia stepped out through the rainbow onto the sandy trail winding between geometric infinities of light. She traversed the corridor, that one long spiral of a thousand colors, without meeting a living soul. The Floreum had remained closed to visitors since the beginning of the siege; and even before that, the curators had not let random passers-by in. Aurelia thoughtfully brought the flower to her face. Hyakinthos happened to be one of the more common plants that grew in these meadows. Yesterday she had spent several hours wandering through fields of the wildest flowers, spurred on in this futile search by another legend Kykur had told her, the legend of the hidden chambers of the Kratista, which only the blind could enter. In these chambers

were said to lie, among other things, the Testament of Jezebel and the famous Jewels of Light: the immaterial jewelry of the ancient masters of Fire, whose brilliance no mortal could endure.

The Crystal Floreum of Jezebel the Gentle was built in 599 PUR by the teknetes Baraxydes Peulypa based on Provega's commentaries on Aristotle's Optical Studies, as well as the real Euclid's Theory of Mirrors, Archimedes' treatise On the Eye and the Candle, and various writings by Provega's students on mathematical optics and physical optics. The Floreum consisted of one hundred and sixteen large halls, the walls and ceilings of which were crystal mirrors of unprecedented purity and smoothness. The geometry of their mutual relations and the architecture of the light piercing the Floreum were calculated by Baraxydes and her sophistes in such a way that inside each hall its boundaries remained imperceptible to man — infinity was reflected in infinity. One entered and exited through the bends and cracks between the mirrors, masked by the play of light and bright reflections.

In the Floreum, it was always a summer noon: the iron dome cut off the access of the true rays of the sun, the light came from somewhere else. Streams of blinding fog flowed uninterrupted from between the glass hydraulics between the mirrors: water vapor transformed into the Form of Light. Even if Floreum had not suffered directly during this siege of Pergamon, no inanimate Substance has survived decay and degradation for so many centuries. A dozen or so mirrors had broken, destroying the illusion of a dozen meadows. Kykur showed Aurelia one of these halls: the world shattered, a skoliosis of light and image — you stretch your hand out in front of you and your hand disappears, reappearing, twisted in improbable cacomorphies, on a hundred distant horizons. Kykur also showed her meadows where the crystal hydraulics had been damaged, the invisible glass pipes must have burst. At dusk, when a cold shadow covered the iron dome of the Floreum, the temperature difference caused a momentary tension in the structure, then small cracks opened in the glass and over the bright meadow, over the flowers, butterflies, birds and warm earth, clouds of liquid light poured straight from the blue infinity.

He warned her that one could not look straight and not be blinded — but what would blind a Ryter of Fire? She looked. Light crawled out of nothingness, from an invisible hole in the air — a shy larva, the fisted hand of an angel of the Sun. Aurelia entered her embrace. Kykur screamed after her. She opened her mouth, drew the Mist into her lungs. Too great an ecstasy to call it pain. She

turned to Ashamader. He shielded his eyes with his forearm. She approached him, the phoenix woman, embraced him tightly, light leaking from every pore of her skin, kissed him — a golden glow burst from between their joined lips. There they first joined their bodies, in a great light, in a cloud of moist fire.

Of course, each such release of the Jezebel Mist from the system of crystal hydraulics caused an irreversible loss in the Floreum's light flow. Some things are doomed to destruction and oblivion by their very uniqueness; uniqueness is part of the definition of a miracle. On the other hand, what is common lasts forever.

How long did the mutual fascination of Aurelia and Kykur survive? A week, perhaps. The disintegration of Form begins with trifles that we would not pay attention to outside of Form. The intonation of the voice in trivial questions. The speed of raising one's head when the other person enters the room. The decisiveness of the articulation of one's desires. The rhythm of breathing, under his, under her gaze. Kykur had recently exploded with violent irritation, having woken up in the middle of the night and seen Aurelia sitting on the bed next to him, watching him with fiery intensity — for her it was still day, she told him, she wouldn't sleep now. So she watched him sleep. Or went out into the city.

Now, having left Floreum, she squinted against the darkness— here, in the outside world, dusk had already fallen, the sultry Pergamon night was approaching. She raised her head. The yellow-pink moon hung in the sky above the eastern horizon, above the crooked gap of the surviving fragment of the defensive wall. She descended the iron steps into the street, and jumped across to escape the hooves of the cattle. The doulos and workers were working non-stop, clearing the rubble and repairing the fortifications. Rebuilding the houses was clearly not a priority for the Basileus of Pergamon appointed by the Lord of Stone.

Ten days after the siege ended, the city still seemed to be locked under a form of war. The last fires had only been extinguished the day before yesterday. The crematorium pyres still burned across the river — though only at night now, so that the columns of sinister smoke would not further lower the morale of the Pergamonians. When she looked there now, all she saw were patches of starless darkness. The Strategos had brought several teknitoi soma from Alexandria, Rome, and Byzantium on the swift *Urkaj* to put an end to the spreading plague; it came to the point where the madmen from the poor districts themselves

were setting fire to their own houses. The remaining aerostats, including the Oroneian, were busy transporting troops. In the air pigs and sea ships, loaded in the Kaikus harbor, The Horror were leaving the Fortress, hundred by hundred, not knowing where they were going. Aurelia did not know either.

The governor's palace was located in the northern complex on Athena Hill; Aurelia turned west, with her back facing the Hill. At night she would have nothing to do in the palace anyway. After the new basileus moved there, even tighter security was ordered; several of Aurelia's night walks ended with a general alarm. However; characteristically, the nightly visits of the Babylonian aristocrat did not surprise anyone.

She went to the Kaikus harbor. Here, in the taverns and hospices by the river, life never died down. Even the burned-down taverns were open, serving food and alcohol on makeshift tables, outdoors, under dirty lanterns and black-smoking torches. Aurelia knew that all this was a result of the war, and yet she could not resist the reflexive associations: filth, chaos and degeneration, on the Moon we would not tolerate such disharmony. She sat down under a salt tree, at a table overlooking the lower harbor, where the Horror's camp was being loaded onto a narrow round-sailing ship. She watched the sailors and dock workers at work.

If the Strategos did not intend to lose the lands he had just conquered, such a massive withdrawal of troops from Pergamon in the face of the expected counteroffensive of the Warlock could only mean one thing: the Urals' forces would be tied up somewhere else.

Doulos brought her wine and bowed low. She certainly did seem like an aristocrat, especially in contrast to the other clients, most of whom were wrapped in cheap robes that hid the fresh disabilities and imperfections of the bodies of the low Form. Shame of the body has no access to people of the lowest morph (the body of a slave is not his property) or the noblest (perfection knows no shame); all the rest would like to be different, but they cannot change. They looked away when she looked at them. Whoever she was, she was a stranger, she had come with the Seleucid army — and their souls still largely belonged to the Warlock. They had been liberated, and now in gloomy silence they awaited their liberation from that freedom.

Only one soldier smiled openly at her; she smiled back, turning towards him without hesitation in a half-profile and straightening her back. No matter how

Kykur would ultimately remember her, he would remain in her morph forever — a trivial matter, but all the more lasting. Besides, he was not a bad man, certainly not a bad Earthling. She remembered him with ironic affection. He had shaved his beard for her, contrary to the Babylonian morph. For hours he had whispered humorous obscenities, vulgar compliments into her ear. How easily he had made her laugh with his impudent laughter. She already missed the cold touch of Ashamader.

The soldier gestured for her to drink another cup of wine. She refused. She stood up and left the dock without looking back.

What exactly is my service? — she thought, climbing the winding streets of Pergamon. What are my duties? Should I remain by the Strategos' side until the end, that is, until his final betrayal, final victory, or final defeat? How am I supposed to pass judgment? I am no longer even certain of my bet with Janna. Will the Strategos ever say openly: "I will not keep my word"? Even if he does say — he is a strategos, how would I know what that really means? Oh, Lady, I only wanted to see Earth...!

Hydor carts sped past her, a new fire broke out somewhere in the city. She followed them. One of the surviving parchment invoices was burning. Aegypt had not blocked the export of papyrus for centuries, and even Vistulian paper was systematically falling in price, but among the aristocracy, the fashion for original, calf parchment was still prevalent. Which would certainly go up in price now. She watched the doomed-to-fail fire-fighting operation. Maybe there really was no point in rebuilding a city on this cursed plain...

She returned to the palace just before dawn. She passed several servants whom she had not expected to find on their feet at this hour. In the atrium, she met Janna-z-Gniezno, unceremoniously washing her veiny feet in the impluvium.

"I thought you were in Amida."

"We just arrived, the Strategos was looking for you, we're leaving for good, pack your bags. What have you done up, earrings, bracelets, a little ring, huh? Have you been messing with your home wardrobe again?"

"I hope you get leprosy, you stupid old hag."

"Burn, burn, maybe your head will clear up a bit."

Aurelia spat purple flame and turned into his chambers.

Chambers — that's too much to say. A small study off a windowless corridor, with a bedroom no bigger than that behind a side door. She found Esthlos Berbelek in the study, leaning over the table, writing something quickly with a charcoal stylus.

"Ah, you are here!" He turned, beaming, and for a moment it seemed to her that he intended to embrace her in greeting. But the Form immediately withdrew. "I wanted to leave you a letter; I know you are not sleeping now. How is Esthlos Ashamader?"

She waved her hand.

"Janna says we are leaving."

"Yes, before noon. I only dropped in for a moment, I do not even have time to meet with the basileus. Has anything happened here that I should know about?"

"Yesterday an envoy from John Blackbeard arrived. It is an official letter. In view of the neutrality of Babylon, with which Macedonia is bound by the bonds of a fresh alliance — and so on, blah blah blah. In short: will not interfere in the war with the Warlock, and as for Nebuchadnezzar, yes, he will even gladly help."

"Excellent. Ha, Alithea may actually succeed in this plan! She is a devil! I must write to her" He remembered the letter he was writing; he crumpled it up and put it in his pocket. "Anyway, we are leaving today. Say goodbye to your Adonis and go."

"Where to? I saw you sending The Horror away. Do you think the Warlock will not claim what is his? What is the plan? Where are you moving them?"

"You do not need to know."

"I must! Esthlos."

He sighed, scratched his nose.

"Close the door."

She closed it.

“An hour before dawn” he muttered “the ghosts of sincerity awaken. Okay, what do you want to know?“

He’ll lie to me, she thought.

“When will the attack on the Urals will take place.”

“The attack on the Urals. That’s impossible, of course, there will be no attack on the Urals. Don’t shout at me about treason, just think for a moment how it would look. I’m sure you have maps here somewhere — oh, give me. Not this one. Look how much territory Maksym Rog controls. Truly, this is an empire. Europe, Asia, if it weren’t for Santa Klaus, would reach the Northern Herdon through the Ibn Kady Strait; and here — it almost reaches Africa. Now imagine that I’m really starting such a campaign. The Warlock sits in his Ural fortresses. Let’s say that everything is going according to plan, victory after victory. Just to seize these lands, crush all his troops and lock him in the Urals will take — how long? Ten, twenty years? Empires fall like elephants: the earth may shake when they finally fall, but in the meantime it lasts and lasts and lasts. But it would be madness on my part to expect only smooth victories. Even if we counted all the allies, we would not have a great advantage. A siege of the Urals! By Sheol, he has turned an entire mountain range into a fortress!“

“You argue very convincingly for the impossibility of victory, Esthlos” Aurelia stated dryly.

“What victory? You must really be spending too much time in my company. What is this all about: the Warlock or the Twist?”

“They won’t follow you to the war in the aether, leaving the Widower behind. Especially now that you’ve convinced them that he’s responsible for the Skoliodoi. That’s exactly what you were trying to convince them of.

“They won’t. Put down that anger! But you’re so hot-headed! Have a little more faith. They’re already united, that’s the most important thing, they don’t run away at the mere mention of Illeia. Now — now look. The offensive will start from the Vistulian line, from the Vistuli Gaelicia. Here, here and here. Kazimir, Thor, Goths, Celts, Huns, part of my Horror.”

“You said it.”

“Because it’s not about conquering lands and bringing the armies of the Empire to their knees. Its sole purpose is to tie up the Widower’s forces and create the appearance of such a threat to him that he will decide to support his troops and move the anthos further west. He will do what he did before: He will move to Moscow. Moscow — Moscow is no longer impregnable, it is not the Ural fortresses.”

“It is a long way from Vistulia to Moscow, he will not wait.”

“He will not. So the point is not to fight stadium by stadium through the armies under the Widower’s anthos, but to immediately deprive them of —“

A muffled sneeze came from the right, from behind the bedroom door. They turned their heads. For a single heartbeat — catatonic stillness. Then Aurelia jumped — a Hyppyres in a battle crown of fire — she yanked the door, it banged against the wall, one of the hinges jumped out of the door frame.

In the bedroom stood Esthlos Kykur Ashamader, half-naked, in only shalwars.

Wiping his nose, he looked with characteristically wide eyes at the burning Aurelia.

“I wanted” he stammered “I wanted to apologize to you, I thought you would come back earlier, I fell asleep, I’m sorry, don’t be angry, Auri.”

“Actually, we haven’t had the opportunity to meet” The Strategos said in a low voice from behind Aurelia’s back. ”Esthlos Hieronim Berbelek-z-Ostrog.”

Kykur approached him, shook his hand.

“Esthlos Kykur Ashamader, it’s an honor for me, really.”

Hieronim Berbelek nodded.

”I don’t doubt it, I don’t doubt it. Aurelia, are you sure there’s no one else there? Under the bed, for example, eh?”

Aurelia fell to her knees before the Strategos.

”Kyrios. I beg your forgiveness.”

Kykur looked from the girl to Berbelek and back again.

"It'll be best," he muttered, retreating to the door to the corridor "As I've already..."

The Strategos looked up at him.

"Can you tell me, beautiful young man, when did you wake up there? Not at the sound of your name?"

Kykur reached behind himself, opened the door and, still retreating, bent in some strange half-bow, not even looking at Berbelek, began to stammeringly mumble:

"I really didn't hear anything, besides, what do I know about it, what does it matter to me, why should I, I didn't hear, I can swear, and to Babylon anyway, it's stupid, think for yourself, Esthlos, what does it matter, whether..."

The Strategos watched him with interest.

He placed his left hand on Aurelia's head, ran his fingers over the Moon-woman's sparkling skin. She raised her eyes to him. The Strategos did not look away from Kykur.

Aurelia rose from her knees.

"But I'm telling you, I didn't hear, by the blood of Marduk, what are you on about, are you mad, Auri, what's all this..."

Berbelek watched as the Hyppyres silently followed the Babylonian retreating into the shadow of the corridor — the soft tread of Aurelia's naked feet, her hips swaying hypnotically like never before — they disappeared from his sight in that shadow. So he saw nothing and heard nothing — only after a moment a short gust of sulfurous heat hit him in the face, as if the gates of hell had opened for a moment in the darkness.

Φ.
The Widower's Eyes

Moscow, the black dawn. Alone among enemies, the anthos of the Warlock at the throat. The Horror is to fall from the sky, but not yet, not yet under this sun; maybe never. Aurelia's right vortex gauntlet flies apart, cutting off two of its fingers in the process. She has lived on Earth too long, this is not her sphere, not her element, she should not have left her native country for so many months...

But-but! (The thought of it burns her veins). But today they will kill a kratstos!

If they will. Scratching the wounds on her fingers, Aurelia stares at the sky-high towers of the prince's kremlin, the white caps of snow contrasting with the greasy soot encrusted on the plaster of the towers.

"What if it takes a few days? "she asked. "I didn't take a shuttle with me, you said, Esthlos, no luggage. An amateur tuning doesn't help either, you need at least a demiurgos uranoise. But now I can't really take it off. Next time it'll probably rip my head off."

"I suggested that you stay with Janna and The Horror."

"Then you'd be even more convinced that the Lady had marked you for a loss."

"I'm not saying anything like that."

"Of course. I'm sorry. Kyrios."

Sarcasm was allowed.

Aurelia turns away from the window, from the panorama of the winter city, and looks at the Strategos, who was sitting, hunched, on a wooden chest, by the open hatch above the stairs. He had to sit, he couldn't straighten up standing up, the sloping roof of the attic was hung too low. Aurelia also moves carefully here, accidentally catching her aetherial armor on the wooden structure could have disastrous consequences; she is forced to strictly control her moods, feelings and reflexes, which immediately translates into the momentum and shape of the morphable armor.

The Strategos takes only two more Horrors with him, but he allows them to take only short keraunets, the so-called herdons, produced through Gustav's overseas invoices — with three, four, five barrels. Besides, they left these weapons here in the attic, when the Esthlos sent them to the city to establish contact with this or that person. He had chosen them because of their knowledge of the Muscovites.

"If you believed her," Aurelia stated, "you wouldn't be here at all. It's stupid to expose yourself like that. Three days in the shadow of the Kremlin, in the heart of the Rog anthos. You're asking for trouble, Esthlos."

"I have to meet this Babuchkin in person."

"Yeah, because you'll look at him and know the truth and the lie right away."

Sarcasm was allowed, she had earned the right to mockery and sarcasm that night, in that muggy Pergamon predawn, half a year ago. But that didn't mean she could show the Strategos no respect, especially in the presence of third parties.

"I'll look and recognize the man. Be quiet at last. I think someone's coming."

He leans even deeper into the hole in the floor.

Aurelia walks very slowly to the other side of the hole, behind the raised flap, and motions for the Horrors to take their positions. Kneeling in the dark corners between the low ceiling and the crooked wall, they pull back the hammers of the heavy Herdons, place their fingers on the intricately forged tongues. They too

move as if immersed in honey or freezing mud: for the attic floor creaks loudly with every step, the old boards cracks underfoot, and the tenants on the ground floor, the Bardionny family, had overly sensitive hearing. The building consisted of three storeys and theoretically belonged entirely to Esthlos Berbelek, since it was part of the estate of his first wife. For years, however, it had been under the management of the Moscow juridical office, and the last desire of the Strategos would be to announce his title of ownership and reveal himself here under his true name. Nevertheless, Esthlos Berbelek had all the keys and knew the area well, knew how to get to the attic on the roofs of the neighboring houses, and knew that the main staircase of the building was open to the street and one could enter and exit quite freely; he just didn't know how terribly loudly the floorboards of the attic creaked.

The steps of the stairs creaks just as much under the feet of Garusha Babuchkin of the Kniyporoshki Babuchkins. The bald court scribe sticks his head out of the square hole in the floor — and looks into the dark muzzles of seven barrel guns. Worse still, he looks straight into the eyes of the Strategos Berbelek leaning over him and, in a natural reflex, throws himself backwards — and since he was standing on steep stairs, almost a ladder, he fell down them headfirst, onto his neck, breaking two rungs in the process and probably more than one bone in his body, with a bang and a clatter. He dose not scream, one must give him credit for that.

Aurelia, who had not had time to grab the scribe by the collar with her aetherless right hand, now jumps after him and drags him back to the attic. The Horrors lower and bolt the hatch. Then everyone freezes motionless, listening. In the meantime, Babuchkin tries to escape somewhere deep in the attic. After the first step, the wood snaps under his heel — everyone looks at him, the barrels of the Horror keraunets move in sync with their heads, Aurelia swells with bright uranoise in irritation, the Strategos with a fist clenched above his head.

Babuchkin stops with his leg half-raised, leaning dangerously out. This time, Aurelia managed to grab him by the bear's coat. In this way, they freeze for a dozen or so minutes. Silence.

"You are Garusha Babuchkin, servant of the Minister of the West," Esthlos Berbelek finally whispers in Greek, without rising from the chest.

"Yes," Babuchkin replied.

Aurelia lets go of his coat collar.

The Strategos does not allow the scribe to look away.

"The moon dog, the Lady's nameless child, a faithful servant, sworn by Nanu Agilatyla on the spring equinox of the eighty-sixth year, by water, honey, blood, and an axe."

Babuchkin suddenly shakes his head, grits his teeth, and steps toward the Strategos.

"Me" he growls. "Me!"

Strategos Berbelek stretches out his long arm, clasps his hand around the bald scribe's neck and pulls him towards him, almost bending him in half.

"Do you know who I am?"

"They told me."

"What did they tell you?"

Babuchkin licks his lips.

"You came to kill him. Hieronim of Kolenica. The Lady sent you to carry on the war. Esthlos."

"Are you afraid of me, Babuchkin?"

Babuchkin tries to laugh and runs out of breath.

"Of course," he finally clears his throat. "Let me go, Esthlos."

"Explain something to me, Babuchkin. How can a coward like you hide among the highest officials of the Widower, among his rats and confidants, and now in the heart of his anthos, under the side of the Kratistos himself — and remain loyal to Illeia the Cruel?"

"I am not a coward!"

"Oh, Babuchkin, Babuchkin. You kiss their asses every day."

"Let go!"

"You sit at your desk, in piles of papers, from morning till night you copy columns of numbers, you were born under the morph of Rog, to oppose your superior — that is unthinkable, you are the most common cockroach of bureaucracy, even your dreams are symmetrical, balanced and patriotic, bourgeois perversions, paper dreams and statistical addictions, you fuck Babuchkinova when the Warlock is in a frenzy, you beat Babuchkinova when storms thunder over the Urals, you give birth to Babuchkiniets with the widower's eyes, you once told an anti-Kratistos joke, your paws are still shaking — How could such a Moscow Ukrainian even dare to betray her?"

The scribe throws himself at the Strategos, kicking and waving his arms. The Strategos holds him in an iron grip.

Babuchkin begins to curse Berbelek, however, in Muscovite, Greek, and Uralic, with each invective growing louder, and Aurelia had to cover his mouth. He bites her hand — he immediately screams silently as flame licks his tongue and palate.

Esthlos Berbelek and Hyppyres exchange questioning glances.

"Mhm, maybe, maybe despite everything..." The Strategos mutters.

"He's tough," Aurelia stated.

"Now, yes, but in front of the Warlock?"

"He's never even seen him."

"So many years in the Kremlin... Mhm..."

"He's tough," Aurelia repeated.

"In the Ural way."

"Let him go."

She lets him go.

Babuchkin was panting heavily.

"You..." He carefully touches his burned lips. "Damn!"

"Now, now. Tell me what you know."

"I won't tell you!"

"You swore, Garusha! The Lady asks!"

The ministerial servant takes a deep breath and swallows. Straightening up, he adjusts the bear fur coat on his shoulders.

"Yes. Łoskas. For the Lady. Hush about the cat that was carved in the Poroshna Hall, the swarthy beavers of Alsenal, under the Khan's Tower. He sews the seat of the Szymats and Szygits."

The Strategos takes his watch out of his pocket and checks the time.

"What's the cast?"

"Like the Szfykles. The Dwarf's Batons are cutting in the branches under the Gremel."

"Did he bring the plague with him?"

"No, half of Moscow was sick yesterday."

"Where—"

"Hush!"

Aurelia crouches over the flap. Krztyp, krztypp, krztkkkk! The moment the hatch begin to rise, she yanks it back, throwing it back with a bang.

Bardionna's grandfather stands on the stairs, a gnarled staff in his hand. His toothless mouth gaping in astonishment, he blinks panickily, blinded by Aurelia.

"Esthlos!" she hisses urgently, not even looking back at the Strategos, her shoulder-plates already swollen, propelled towards a terrible blow.

Esthlos Berbelek hesitates briefly.

"Let him go," he says.

"We won't wait any longer, he won't make it anyway."

"Get out!" Aurelia snapped at the grandfather.

He probably doesn't understand the words, but he certainly understands the

intention. He drops his staff, screaming at the top of his lungs, and runs down the stairs.

The Strategos rises from the chest. He goes to the window, stretched, straightened — Here is the only place he can straighten freely.

He nods to the Horrors.

"The little bird."

One of the Horrors gives his keraunet to his colleague and, having pushed the disoriented Babuchkin out of the way, disappears behind a pile of junk piled up against the side wall. He appears with a carambus braid in his hand. He throws away the cloth covering it and unties the carambus braid; lighter-than-air fibers rise slowly and gather under the ceiling, in the thicket of old spiderwebs.

Aurelia, unable to sleep during the long, winter nights of Moscow, had been studying the structure of the spiderwebs. The Strategos points out its characteristic features. It was among other things from the shape of the latest spiderweb that they know that the Kratistos Maksym Rog had indeed arrived in Moscow, that it was not just a rumor; that the Vistulian offensive had achieved its goal. For the spiders weave their webs according to the pattern of the Anthos seal of the Warlock, in pentagrams, mandalas, Ural stars, regular like astrological constructs of the heavens.

The hawk, freed from the Oronean cage, spreads its wings. A Horror hands it to the Strategos. The ornithomorph is heavy, Esthlos Berbelek rests his elbow on the window frame. With his other hand he strokes the hawk's head. The bird fixes its black eyes on the Strategos.

"Down, down, down," Berbelek repeated. "Take, take, take."

The hawk cocks its head left, right, left.

"Downtakedowntakedowndowndowndowndown," he squawks.

The Strategos pushes open the window frame — Frosty air rushes into the attic, and all of them, even Babuchkin, wrapped in a brown coat, shivers. Around Aurelia's body, on the other hand, warm steam begins to gather in aetherial epicycles, and a white mist weaves above her head.

The Strategos sticks his arm out the window and tosses the hawk above the humpbacked chimney. The great ornithomorph squawks something incomprehensible once more, then flies away, soaring higher than the ridge with a few flaps of wings and disappears from Aurelia's sight into the perspective of the labyrinth of white roofs.

Aurelia, the Lady of the Mist, turns back to Babuchkin.

"What are we going to do with him?"

Babuchkin shows her the Inverted Horns.

The Strategos shakes his head.

"Don't let it get into your blood," he says, leaning over the Moonwoman. "The power is in the potency itself, in the possibility of choosing, not in the choice already made. We could remove him — but why? Besides, we know that, a servant of the Lady. Right, Babuchkin?"

"I have a wife and children."

"Is this an offer or a threat? But don't be afraid, it's a done deal now, you won't get in the way of anything. Well, run away."

The scribe looks back at the stairs, shifts from one foot to the other, licks his lips

— before their eyes he is breaking from one Form to another

— and in the end he doesn't move from his spot.

"I'll be there myself."

"You have a wife and children."

"The devil fuck them."

Laughing, the Strategos raises his hands above his head.

"The sky heard, the earth heard." He nods to the Horrors. "Block the entrance."

They move several crates onto the flap, and throw a rusty cauldron on top.

“You see,” Aurelia mutters to Esthlos Berbelek, pointing to the servant “he is ready to risk his own life. He expects that the new regime will make him, as a reward for his dedication and loyalty, at least a minister. Such sincere egoism should dispel your last doubts, Esthlos.”

Berbelek lights a cigarette. Leaning against the window frame, he flicks the ashes outside onto the snowy roof.

”A strategos knows,” he says slowly, ”that the best plans are those that do not require the people used in them to act against their nature, but in accordance with it; all the more so does a kratistos know that. The hardest thing to see through is a deception built from a thousand tiny truths, where the falsehood exists only in the way they are put together, in the mind of a strategos. It is always better to use an object that exists for that very purpose to achieve a given goal, than another, contrary to its purpose. A knife to cut, a rope to bind, a Babuchkin to betray.“

”I don’t understand. What could the Lady gain by giving you an agent she knows has been exposed and is being controlled by the Warlock?“

”I’m not—”

”Shut up!”

Berbelek flicks ashes out the window, the embers burn black paths in the snow. Temple gongs ring out over Moscow. From the north, behind the Kremlin, flocks of crows, hraks, and ravens rise. The Strategos watches them with his gaze through a curtain of gray smoke.

“What would she gain? First, she wouldn’t lose much, a few troops, one strategos, she would simply wait a few, a dozen, a few dozen years for the next kratistoslayer. Second... Consider that this is the only opportunity when she can get rid of me so easily, then she will have to accept my terms of alliance. Secondly— she can gain everything, she can gain direct power over the world.“

“What are you talking about —”

“Who would resist an alliance between the Urals and the Moon?”

“You’re crazy. Esthlos.”

“Oh.”

“They hate each other. The Lady and the Warlock.“

“Don’t believe in such things as hatred and love between kratistoi. There are only different paths to power: such and such, with these and against those, and vice versa. Think: who would resist such an alliance? This is the strongest possible argument.

“But how... I don’t understand.“

“I suppose that was her original plan. That’s why she sent Lakatoia to the Warlock. Long negotiations were held, he even accepted Shulima into his entourage, now I know that Ihmet Zajdar, may Manat reward him, to whatever hell or paradise he ended up, that Zajdar saw a true image in Chersonesos then. Perhaps the alliance had already begun to function, on a small scale in Africa, they had tried together to stop the Skoliodoi using Pythagorean numerology, to no avail. Something must have happened, Illeia then decided to personally take over Aegypt, she sent Shulima: a daughter for the Throne of Alexandria. We did not understand why Rog suddenly fell to the west, this whole war, the siege of Kolenica, was just a splinter of a much deeper struggle. This and his alliances, with John Blackbeard, tightening ties with Babylon, he was protecting himself. But the Lady did not want war with the Urals at all, it seems to me that she was not happy with my strategy, I surprised her and she could not refuse. Now, however, she has the opportunity to return to the original plan. She knows that I will strike, she knows where and when, she knows that only I can do it, personally, with my own hand. All she has to do is send a short warning to Maksym: Here is a strategos possessed by revenge, who has gotten out of control. We will fall straight into a trap, there will be a thousand-strong army waiting for us there, dragged from the deepest cradles of the Urals. Illeia will save the Warlock’s life. Do you understand what such a debt means to the kratistos? It was as if he had paid her homage. Who will then resist the alliance of the Urals with the Moon?“

“If you believe in that, Esthlos — why did you come to Moscow at all?“

”Do I have to repeat myself? The best plans, the plans of kratistoi and strategoi, do not require anything from us that we would not do of our own free will anyway.“

"Then I'd rather be on my own —"

"Too late. They are already here to kick me off this stool."

Strategos Berbelek throws away his cigarette butt and climbs onto the window, climbing out onto the slightly sloping roof. Shingles creak under his jugras, snow falls, the brick-red flaps of his humyia cloak flap in the cold wind. Violent knocking can be heard from under the pile of crates, the Bardionni are knocking on the attic, he doesn't even look back.

Aurelia jumps out after him, the wind tears ribbons of sticky steam from the epicycles of her armor. She follows the Strategos' gaze.

The *Urkaj* descends towards them in a gentle arc, emerging from among the churning clouds hanging low in the dirty, winter sky. With its aetherial wings partially spread, it looks more like a bony harpy—a harpy burning with light blue fire, as big as a stadium. The wings curl in flight, drawing back to the long neck of the star scorpion, into the open gills, just before the collar of its uranoise armor. For as the *Understar* slows and falls over the city, it increasingly relies in its flight on a spiral tail, whirling so fast that to the human eye it blurs into a cloud of bright light.

A blue glow falls on the snow-covered roofs, streets, trees, and the not-so-distant towers of the Kremlin. A dozen or so windows open, and the curious Muscovites immediately retreat, blinded. The two Horrors climb onto the roof of the tenement house, dragging three heavy bags and Babuchkin behind them. The *Urkaj* is already so close that the gale stirred up by the scorpion's speeding tail is raising clouds of snow, stripping the dark walls and roofs bare — thus the crude, painfully regular and ascetic architecture of the Widower's Moscow is revealed. The terrified servant begins to slide down, screaming, waving his arms; Aurelia grabs him by the collar of his coat for the second time.

"As long as we have the right —"

"Of course!" the Strategos laughs bawdily, buttoning up the Herdonian cloak and pulling on his basilisk-skin gloves. "To the Kremlin, to the Kremlin, to kill the Warlock!"

The lunar boat slows down even more and finally stops, hanging in the air thirty pous above the littered back yard of the tenement house, the garbage

flying high above the ground, catching in a snow cyclone. The scorpion opens its mouth, hot brightness bursts from it. Aurelia — she alone — sees there, deep in the corridor of light, her uncle, Omixos Zarnik, among other Ryters, ranks of Hyppyroi in speeding armor, with aetheric keraunets and Moon banners of red pyrcanvas, flaming symbols of the Labyrinth.

The Horrors throws Babuchkin over, throw luggage and weapons after him, then they themselves jump, then the Strategos jumps, and finally the Moon-woman. The scorpion is already rising and turning, not even closing its mouth, Moscow flashes past Aurelia in a blur.

Omixos hands her the family keraunet. She confidently takes the heavy weapon. Her uncle — his face almost invisible behind the bulging helmet — pats her on the shoulder, aether grating sharply in the clash with aether.

"Into battle."

" Now! Now, now, now!"

The scorpion thrashes its tail against the walls of the Arsenal. The Kremlin shakes to its foundations. The Timur Tower, struck first when it opens fire on the *Urkaj*, collapses under its own weight in a thunder of crumbling stones, in a sliding avalanche of thousands of lithos of rubble. Besides, no one is firing yet, not even the pyresiders and grapeshots from the Kremlin barracks of Ivan Karl's Bulashki are sounding — not a minute has passed, the horns from the Clock Tower have not yet sounded in alarm.

The scorpion tears through the southern wall of the Arsenal, striking in a mechanical rhythm, over and over and over again. At the height of the fourth floor, a breach is created as wide as a scorpion's head. The *Urkaj* slides into it. During the battle, the moonboat pulsates with such brilliance, such heat erupts from its pyraetheric armor, that the snow lying on the surrounding surfaces melts with a hiss and flows down the building in crystalline streams, the water turns into silver mist.

The body of the *Understar* is completely lost in it, only a cruel brightness erupts from the hot cloud. From this brightness the burning Fire Riders rush into the Arsenal, Aurelia in the first dozen; In total, Hierokharis had given

twenty-seven Ryters Pyru for this mission, a full enneon. They rush out already accelerating, pushed by the impetus of the heavy epicycles of uranoise, encompassing their thighs, knees, shoulders.

Aurelia is in the triplet led by her uncle, and as the three Ryters are completed by the Kruzos' cousin, Timothy Phaeton. Omixos points to the left. They run toward the western door of the hall, in twenty-pous leaps, opening star-shaped wounds in the floor with each step. Marble flies through the air, fragments ricocheting from the swift aether, once, twice, three times, finally deeply scarring the thick walls, destroying the frescoes and funeral votive offerings that cover them.

Another triplet breaks through immediately on the floor below: kneeling, the Hyppyroi drill their fists into the floor in terrifying howling vortexes, they are immediately surrounded by the gray dust of ground stone.

Three other triplets do not stop at all in their rush and break through the windows in the opposite wall, falling out and developing gigantic epicycles of airborne uranoise there: falling, they rip the northern wall apart.

The triplet directs towards the eastern door, running past four sentries in the uniforms of Bulashki soldiers. Without stopping, the knights tear apart the Muscovites lining up to shoot, the meat, bones and Bulashkis' furs ground by the aether shot in all directions. The triplet leave a cloud of damp red behind it.

In the meantime, Omixos reaches the door. He does not stop to open it — he rips open the heavy gates with a kick. The Hyppyroi jump over, swallowing tornadoes of sawdust in the epicycles of their armor, which, by the way, immediately catch fire.

More paintings and ancient weapons on the walls. Zarnik points: towards the stairs. A few soldiers appear on the stairs. Timothy grabs a life-size bronze statue of Tamerlane with his left hand — the assassination uranoise describes Phaeton in thick circles — and throws it at the soldiers. The statue crushes them against the wall, punching a hole in the wall.

They run toward the stairs. The longer their leaps, the less important the bottom and the top are. With the momentum taken from the uranoise wheels, they bounce off the walls, furniture, pedestals, railings, columns, biting their

vortex gauntlets into wood, iron and stone. They are accompanied by a constant grinding and whistling of shrapnel, after the engravers pass, a thick suspension of sharp particles from ground materials, a stench of burning, hangs in the air.

On the third floor, a Bulashki squad spils out into the corridor. Keraunets thundering. The Hyppyroi armors, accelerating to their maximum, deflects the bullets in accordance with the twist of their epicycles.

The mace-bearers are screaming, the decurions are blowing their whistles, the pyros is exploding, the Arsenal is shaking under the blows of the scorpion and the Ryters, the plaster is crumbling. Behind the windows on the other side of the corridor, a blurry stain: a falling Hyppyres drags a red mane of fire behind him.

Omixos runs toward the soldiers — the floor, the statue, the chest, the ceiling — in the fifth leap he falls on them with his arms spread out, his armor swelling to the width of the corridor, in a halo of fire — prrrrrrfstsch! — scraps of burning meat hit the wainscoting, mosaics and canvases of the masters.

Aurelia and Timothy break through to the rooms on the left and right. Aurelia, behind the second demolished wall, reaches the residential part of the Kremlin, to the bathroom, naked women rise from the steaming water. They don't even have time to see the speeding Moonwoman behind the curtain of dust, smoke, fire and aether — the tilts of the orbit of the uranoise catch them, as the Hyppyres breaks through to the next room. Several severed limbs, a split head, a torn belly — that's behind Aurelia, she can't see, she can't hear. Cold water gushes from the torn hydraulics.

Aurelia is already in the passage between the Arsenal and the Khan's Tower. From behind the closed iron door, through narrow openings, a hail of bullets hits the Ryter. There may be trouble with the iron. Aurelia tears the grate from the window on the right, jumping out, bitting the ice-covered wall with her vortex gauntlet (the ice turning to steam). The vortex gauntlets grind ancient stones, purinic aether against impure ge — and the lowest element succumbs to the highest element. The fiery Ryter run towards the tower, leaving a wide burnt streak behind it on the vertical wall.

It falls inside together with the entire window, with the frame and grates, and fragments of the wall. The carpets and tapestries are engulfed by the heat of the Hyppyres. The soldiers turn toward her, organizing themselves in three rows

in the tight space, a dozen or so barrels aiming at Aurelia. Aurelia, crouched on the wall above a small ruby bust of the Warlock, bites her tongue deeply and breathes fire. Pyr rushes in expanding vortices, pushing out of the orbit of the helmet, red spirals reach and embrace the soldiers. The last salvo — because now everyone is burning, deathly screams fill the passage, people are rolling on the floor, running blindly forward, one jumps through the window gap, falls, dragging a braid of fire behind him.

Aurelia pays them no attention. She turns and jumps into the depths of the tower, that was her task.

On the third floor — two people. They run away, cutting themselves as they run.

On the second floor — no one.

On the first floor — several officials. She sets the offices on fire along with them.

On the ground floor — soldiers escape through the open main gate. She lets them escape. Then she bolts the gate and collapses part of the ceiling behind them, blocking the rest of the entrance. She does the same with the back gate.

She checks underground. There, hidden in the basement behind moldy shelves, she found two terrified aristocrats along with several doulos. After a second of thought, she left them alive, collapsing the basement stairs behind him.

She returned to the Arsenal.

The Hyppyroi had apparently taken over all the upper floors, the upper passages have been closed. The battle continues on the ground floor, where the Bulashki had broken through to the rescue with heavy weapons and the Ural War morphezoons, now released from their chains. There are two Ares with them.

“We have casualties” says Ryter Zarnik. “Armor won’t stop a volley of grapeshot, watch out for the morphezoon, they spit some acidic venom.“

They look out the window of the velvet anteroom on the third floor of the Arsenal. A blue glow shines from behind the golden dome of the Eartheater’s

Temple, a rhythmic boom rolls over the Kremlin, making the windows rattle. The window they are looking through cracks after the third thunder. It was the *Urkaj* that is reducing the buildings of the Bulashkov barracks there to rubble.

“Timothy?”

Omixos points his thumb down with a flame.

Strategos Hieronim Berbelek descends stairs slippery with blood, through smoke and gray dust; the first thing you see is the brick-red flaps of his Herdonian cloak.

“Where is this Hall of Disarray?”

Ryter Zarnik slows down the rotation of his armor and bows his head to the Strategos.

“Please follow me, Esthlos.”

As he walks, Berbelek straightens the cuffs of his coat and shirt sleeves. He buttons the last button under his neck, brushing the ash from his shoulders. Now Form will be the most important. Aurelia looks at him through the calming helmet. The Esthlos catches her gaze.

”I should have told Babuchkin to polish my jugras, he would have been useful for something.” He gives Aurelia a crooked smile.

Aurelia does not smile back.

”There was no betrayal,” she says. ”You are sick with lies, kyrios.”

”But there was. Fortunately, I was not the one betrayed.”

They emerge into a hall lined with hyex wood, full of ancient armor and banners. The wood is mostly chopped and broken, the armor is split, the banners are burned or burning. A cold wind blows through the broken windows.

There are six doors in the walls of the hall; all are open or torn from their frames except the northern central ones — made of bronze and likot, covered with intricate bas-reliefs. Above them are the antlers of an unnamed cacomorph.

Four Fire Riders watch in front of the doors, with keraunets at their shoulders

and armor howling in damnation.

“Two entered and have not returned” the Ryter Ablazos says. “He remains there inside, we have blocked the northern cloisters on the other door, he could not have escaped.”

“Closed?”

“They close themselves. Hidden mechanisms in the wall. Kyrios?“

“Just don’t shoot me by accident” replies the Strategos, smoothing the folds of his cloak. “Don’t be surprised if those two jump out at you: in the meantime they have probably managed to love him sincerely. Aurelia, open it up.”

“I will go with you, kyrios.”

“No.”

“I promised. You will not go in alone.”

The Strategos watches her for a moment, that is, for two blows from the invisible *Urkaj*, when the plaster crumbles and the walls tremble.

“You will stay by the door. You will not move, even if he rips my heart out. Give me your word, Ryter.“

“Kyrios...”

“Give me your word.”

Aurelia clenches her jaw, flames shoot around her head.

“I can’t. I won’t. No.”

The Strategos nods.

“Fine. You may enter.”

Aurelia pulls back the hammer of the keraunet, checks the pyros on the anvil. Uncle Zarnik greets her with a raised hand. Aurelia whispers a prayer to the Lady. She bursts into flames, the pyru igniting in her veins.

She kicks the brown door.

They enter.

Corpses. The western wall is hung with dozens of various exotic antlers, the eastern wall opens with a gallery of crystal windows onto the panorama of Moscow, both walls are several dozen pous long. Most of the antlers have fallen, lie in piled heaps, mixed with the corpses of men and women in expensive costumes. Corpses, corpses. The crystal of ornamental windows covers the mosaic floor on the opposite side of the hall, a tall, black-haired man wades into the crystal — kyrios, kyrios, kyrios — don't look at the Kratistos!

Aurelia tosses the spiral stock of the keraunet to her shoulder and shoots the Warlock in the temple. She immediately lowers and loaded the weapon.

Hieronim Berbelek shakes his head. He went toward him. He covers her target.

A few sentences are spoken in the voice of the Kratistos in a language unknown to Aurelia — the Strategos replies. They talk in Muscovite for a moment. Aurelia looks out for a keraunet barrel. Don't talk to him! Kill him! Don't talk to him! It's a kratistos! Strike while running! Without thinking! Don't talk to him! Aurelia stares at the keraunet's barrels. Where have the two Hyppyroi gone? Did he order them to cut their own throats?

Without realizing it, she has retreated to the wall in the meantime; the antlers above her are catching fire. She doesn't look up. Footsteps, the crunch of crushed crystal, the rustle of material, the calm voices of two men. She clenches her teeth, listens through the steady roar of flames, through the roar of rushing blood. They have switched to Greek.

"...but they were your dogs, you bred them, your morph."

"Yes. I've even been wondering about that recently. When you married her —A kratistos and a mortal girl — you couldn't have not known."

"Oh, because there's one thing you don't understand: it was love after all. On her part — that's obvious; but also on mine."

"Miranda Ajuda Karżanka."

"Today only history."

“I read a lot. Dramas, songs, poetry — fairy tales for the people. In these oldest sources — there was no assassination attempt.“

“Over a thousand years, yes, over a thousand years ago. About that assassination attempt, hmm — and what do you think, dog breeder?“

“There was no assassination attempt.”

“There was no assassination attempt, but there is the Widower. The more I loved her, the less Miranda remained in Miranda. She could no longer stand a day away from me. Since she would not be able to kill me... Can one hate such a beautiful rat? But can one love such a beautiful rat? How do you do it, dog breeder?”

“The Lady of Dusk would certainly be able to kill me.“

“Ah, Shulima, her. Yes. You are lucky. But your first — “

“It was an accident. Dogs.”

“These are always accidents. But you know the furious pain after her death, the terrible hatred, the despair that is hatred. You know, you know.”

”I do not hate people.”

“It is more noble than to despise them. Rigor and fear are necessary, and a hierarchy of strong power, an order of submission in which there will never be a mixing of the weak with the strong, masters with slaves, love with obedience. You know.“

“There is only one Warlock.”

”You may not believe it, but this morph was already waiting for me. In this land, in these people, in their history, languages, religions — it was waiting for me, it was ready, necessary, purposeful. Here, through it, the path to divine perfection leads. The Widower brought to fulfillment a potency older than him, he correctly read the keros. Look. A winter rainbow.

“It is the moonboat that destroys your bestiary.”

“Beautiful. Centuries ago I intended to marry the Lady, but I imagined who might be born of such a union and I have remained in my power. I have no

idea who brought the Twist into the world, but it was not me. What do the kratistoi of her former lands say about her return?“

“She is not returning.”

“She’s coming back, she will return. I heard that Nebuchadnezzar is going to anoint your daughter, dog breeder, a foster child of Lakatoia. She’s coming back. Look. She’s coming out again —“

Their breaths, the crystal crackling under their heels, the rustle of sudden movements — Aurelia raises her eyes.

Hieronim Berbelek pulls a dagger with a blade like flame from the chest of the Kratistos — the man who was Kratistos. He pulls it out, looks at it thoughtfully, and stabs it again — one, two, three, four — the bloody stain spreads across the man’s white shirt. Hieronim Berbelek lowers the dagger this time, takes a step back. He mechanically runs his left hand over the perfectly smooth material of his coat.

Maksym Rog steps back uncertainly, shuffling his feet in the crystal. He hits the chair by the window with his hand, sits down — or rather falls into it helplessly. His shirt is already completely red.

Hieronim Berbelek stands over him with a dagger at his side, crimson drops fall from the winding blade, drip, drip, drip. Hieronim Berbelek stands and waits, staring at Rog breathing slowly.

Maksym turns his eyes to Aurelia.

“My throat is dry,” he says, pointing to the table next to him.

Aurelia puts down the keraunet, approaches the table, and hands Rog a cup of wine. She will wonder for the rest of her life why she did it.

Maksym takes the cup, but does not raise it to his lips. His hand falls to the railing. He smiles at Esthlos Berbelek.

It takes Aurelia a very long time to realize that Rog is already dead.

“Kyrios...” she begins, but the Strategos does not react.

Aurelia returns for the keraunet. The antlers have ignited the clothes of the

dead, a whole pile of corpses is burning, the sweet smell dulls the mind. She suddenly feels very tired. The fire on her goes out, the armor slows down.

She looks back from the door. Snow has begun to fall and the first white flakes settle on Rog's face, shoulder, and bloodstained shirt. Now, after death — how small, thin, shrunken his body seems, dirty Matter freed from the shackles of Form; his black hair conceals numerous streaks of gray, his face is covered with a thousand wrinkles, blue veins poke through the skin.

Aurelia leaves the Corner Hall. The gathered Hyppyroi rise, slow down their armor, turn their keraunets to salute. At first she does not understand anything, until she follows their gazes. Hieronim Berbelek quietly follows her, a bloody dagger in his hand, in a shiny glove made of basilisk skin.

Aurelia follows the Strategos as they slowly walk through the ruined, burning halls of the Arsenal. The fighting is dying out, and the blows of the scorpion tail of the *Urkaj* that made the earth tremble are no longer heard. Since the Strategos does not respond, hegemon Zarnik himself sends out individual triplets to their next tasks. When they hear a cry from the Kremlin courtyard, they stop, turn toward the cloisters of the Old Prince's Palace. It has barely struck a quarter past ten and dusk is approaching. This is the end, thus the Strategos' plan is being fulfilled. From the northwest, the black circle of Oroneia slowly approaches the cloudy sky, the gigantic disc of the airy country of the Storm King. They watch as if hypnotized. It seems that Oroneia is moving very slowly, but before their eyes, more districts are falling into darkness, a wave of darkness is rushing along the ice-bound river. Oroneia is also still lowering its base, curtains of whirlwinds several stadia long are already touching the tops of ziggurats and minarets. One minute? Two? Fifteen minutes? Snowflakes are waiting in the air. Is it really dusk?

In Moscow, immersed in gray shadow, the coal legions of Horror, hosts of bronze angels are falling from the sky. Bells are ringing, lights are coming on in thousands of windows. No one knows anything yet, but everyone feels it. Ostrog's banners are flying on the bony towers of the Kremlin. Maksym Rog is dead, the Warlock is gone — the emptiness of his Form, the terrifying freedom grips hearts.

The Moscow dogs are the first to speak: the howl of black longing flows through the snowy city. Mr. Berbelek looks up from the dagger he is cleaning for a moment. The howling grows. Mr. Berbelek polishes the Chaldic blade.

One, two, one, two, one, two, three. Who can name that smile quivering on Mr. Berbelek's lips?

V

X.
The Kratisticide

The fog swirled around the carriage. Mr. Berbelek did not look outside, he would have only seen the shadows of Vodenburg architecture, quickly escaping besides, shadows and lights: between the surfaces of the stone, every now and then the jagged halos of pyrokian lanterns exploded, themselves also invisible in the fog. The carriage was tall, massive, pulled by four horses; with the doors slammed shut and the roof drawn, it somewhat resembled ancient carriages. On the sides, the NIB emblems gleamed. Next to the driver in a black cape sat a graphite Horror; two others, with three-barrel Herdon rifles in their hands, hung at the back of the carriage. The broken fog once again woven itself behind him into threads, stripes and ribbons — but now much more orderly, regular and symmetrical, arranging itself according to the pattern of the streets and squares of night Vodenburg, along the cold walls and damp cobblestones; and so it remained for long minutes.

Mr. Berbelek — a powerful man in an expensive coat, with a tanned face and dark eyes hidden under thick eyebrows — leafed through rustling newspapers. The editions were from the thirteenth, fourteenth and fifteenth of Octobris 1198; the newspapers from the previous days, when he was outside the city, had been left especially for him. The "Głos Neurgii" wrote extensively about the offer made to the prince by the young kratistos Erik Helvetius: After the departure of the Storm King, as a result of the shifting of the domains of K'Azura and Leo Vialle to the south, a void was created in the keros surrounding Neurgia, which sooner or later had to be filled. One commentator even speculated that the

arrival of Hieronim the Kratisticide ("the most famous resident of the princely city of Vodenburg today") might have something to do with it. HIERONIM THE MEDIATOR. On the next page, a table of food prices. Famine in the east and new civil wars breaking out in the ruins of the Ural Empire are influencing the market even here, on the other side of Europe. *HERDON IN THE LABYRINTH: As our correspondents from across Okeanus report, King Gustav, with the consent of Kratistos Anaxegiros, has sent an embassy to the Moon to establish diplomatic relations with the Labyrinth. Kratista Illeia responded favorably; at the court in New Rome, an embassy from the Moon is expected.* In *The Rider in the Twilight*, traditionally a caricature of Chancellor Lóke. He stands on the port walls of Vodenburg and, tearfully, waves goodbye to ships flying the banners of the Four Swords. Indeed, the new order in Alexandrian Africa caused a large part of the southern emigrants to leave Neurgia; and also a significant decrease in the profitability of the part of the trade that had traditionally passed through the port of Vodenburg. The next article summed it up most emphatically: JOHN BLACKBEARD SIGNING THE SICILY TREATY! NEW AXIS: ROME-MACEDONIA-PERGAMON. Alpine Customs Duties have been abolished; this winter parchment will become cheaper again.

Katlakkk-talakk-talakk, katlakkk-talakkkk, the horses walked in a steady rhythm, the cold night provoked memories of warm nights. The Moon's embassy will open in Herdon, but in Pergamon the Lady's Eidolus, Lakatoia, the Evening Maiden, has already settled. In the land of Marius Gesomata, under the anthos of the Storm King, in the vicinity of the garrisons of the three Columns of Horror in the pay of the Labyrinth, there for the first time she can declare herself, that is, her mother's daughter, there she can reveal herself to the world. The Kratistos of the Fourth Pergamon is Julius Cadetius, to whom, by a secret agreement with the Kratistos, the keros of the Seleucidite country, from the Sea of Kaftor to the sources of the Euphrates and the Tigris, fell. Oroneia rested on the ruins of the Fortress, on the cursed Plain of Blood — the anthos of the Storm King will heal it. Only Athena's Hill, the Library and the Crystal Floreum were spared — the land of Air and Fire settled on the other bank of the Kaikus. Mr. Berbelek recalled that hot night, when he visited Esthle Shulima Amitace in her new seat. Former followers and agents of the old cult gathered from everywhere, no one could get into the Floreum anymore who did not receive permission from all the successive guards, entering this city of ruins was truly like entering a labyrinth. Even the Kratisticide had to send a herald ahead; only at dusk did confirmation come. Mr. Berbelek was led in

by a very young Heltian woman in a labyrinth necklace. Instead, they walked along a spiral sand path through dozens of endless sunny meadows, from light to light; evidently, Shulima had already begun to manipulate the architecture of The Floreum. Children of various morphs ran through the meadows, dozens — and teenagers, Mr. Berbelek also saw wet nurses nursing infants. "Where do they come from?" he asked the Heltian woman. "From all sides of the cross" she replied "from under the Form of every kratistos. — They came out onto an African meadow." A silver stream flowed from behind an acacia grove, monkeys frolicked between acacias, the yellow backs of tapalopes shimmered in the savannah grass, cheetahs stretched out lazily under the trees watched it all. From behind the stream, from the great blue, slowly poured out clouds of fat light, the white milk of blinding brilliance flowed. First two colorful birds flew out of it, the Heltian knelt down, the birds circled over Mr. Berbelek, he raised his head — he did not notice when Lakatoia emerged from the mist of Fire. "Esthlos." "Esthle." They smiled at first sight; but he did not like the lightness, banality of that smile. Instead of kissing Shulima's wrist, he grabbed her by the waist, pulled her, kissed her greedily, rapaciously. She did not resist, but when he then moved her to arms' length, he met the same cold, jadeite gaze of Esthle Amitace, whom he had hoped never to see again after the fatal jurja. The nature of the situation was becoming painfully obvious. He took a step back. Shulima sat down in the grass, wrapping her linen skirt. She motioned him to the seat next to her. He didn't react. Smoothing the folds of his shirt, he looked around the luminous meadow (butterflies circled above his head in regular circles). "Are you rebuilding The Floreum?" "It needs repairing anyway." "Let me guess: the Storm King." "Yes, he pays me frequent visits." "Yes. Of course. An eternal ally of the Labyrinth." "You won't find a trace of a lie on my lips. Have I ever said I love you? I am the daughter of the Moon Witch, Illeia the Cruel, what kind of morph did you expect me to be?" Mr. Berbelek could only squint. Gods, she was still beautiful, even more beautiful, in a million reflections, in this whitest light.

The fog was thickening, but through the carriage windows he could already see the tall shadows of the buildings belonging to the prince's complex, the horses slowed down, climbing the steep hill; they were approaching the palace of Gregory the Grim. Mr. Berbelek took an invitation from the inside pocket of his coat, written on calf parchment in the prince's own hand. Yesterday, sent with the post from the estate in Ostrog, another invitation arrived at Vodenburg: to Alexandria, to the naming ceremony of the newborn granddaughter of Esthlos

Hieronim Berbelek — the daughter of the Hypatia XV and the Governor of Upper Aegypt. Mr. Berbelek was not present when she was born (he had convened a council of astromekans in the Fourth Labyrinth that day), but he had visited Alexandria half a year ago, at the time of the ceremonial wedding and elevation of Alithea. Nebuchadnezzar the Golden, who had already weakened so much that his anthos reached only two hundred stadia beyond the borders of Alexandria, could not refuse and for the first time in over three centuries left his tower in Menout to bless the new Hypatia. For him, it was the ultimate humiliation and a symbol of defeat: to sit at the same table as the Kratisticide, opposite a man with the blood of Power on his hands. Engravings from the wedding ceremony later went around the world, Mr. Berbelek saw the image in the newspapers of Europe, Herdon, and The Gaudat Lands: the Kratistos and the Kratisticide, both raising a toast in honor of the young couple, but neither of them looking at the newlyweds, their gaze fixed on each other. Alithea, on the other hand, smiled radiantly, with that childlike smile of hers, she was capable of it, if she wanted to, she had that smile in her arsenal. She was portrayed in a red Aegis skirt, standing between sloping pylons, with a bouquet of grain in her left hand and a Pythagorean cube in her right, still smiling an Isis smile. Mr. Berbelek remembered a completely different expression on her face, the one with which she had knelt before him a few months earlier, together with the freshly healed David. They found Hieronim in the farthest corner of the peristyle of the Alexandrian palace, he had just eaten breakfast in the shade of a water palm, a purple dawn was rising over the Mareot; he turned his gaze from the morning glow and they were already kneeling here, he could not escape from under this Form. Alithea knew in what mood he had just returned from Pergamon from Shulima, Mr. Berbelek would not have been surprised if Shulima had sent an appropriate letter to Alithea immediately. "Father." "Stand up, what are you doing!" "We ask for your blessing, kyrios." "Alithea, you know very well that I will not oppose you, it is your life." "You have opposed and you are opposing. I do not want anything to happen to him. Give me your word." He was furious then. "Away! Away from my sight!" Monshebe jumped up, but she grabbed him by the arm. They remained on their knees. "Father." "What do you think I am, that I would choose murderers for my own daughter's husband?" "No, of course not. But did Shulima also persuade us to get together? You know. What is brought together by the Evening Maid, what is fulfilled in love. And under the morph of Strategos, plans are fulfilled that he himself has not even fully thought out yet. Someone will notice the grimace on your face and will want to please you... David has already narrowly escaped death at the hands of your

vassal once. You will bless us, kyrios. Sincerely. I am carrying his child. I have to believe that deep in your heart you wish us happiness." To this day he had no idea what she was supposed to know; he himself did not know whether he was happy for their joy or despised them for Shulima's perfidy. All the engravings from the wedding depicted the impassive, stern face of the Kratisticide.

The iron gates creaked, the carriage entered the palace courtyard. The lights from dozens of tall windows and external pyrroki lamps finally broke through the waves of fog. The Horror jumped to the ground, servants in black and red livery ran up from the marble stairs. When the doors were opened and the likot steps were pushed closer, the temple bells in the city below began to strike ten; the sound came low, muffled, eaten away by the dark damp. Another Vodenburg night of fog and stone.

MR. Berbelek grimaced ironically at his reflection in the golden mirror, transferred the pyrykte to his left hand, adjusted the cuffs of his white shirt and black caftan, mentally counted to four, and then entered the Hall of Forefathers. The Neurgs bowed together, as if embraced by one morph. He nodded politely with his pyrykte. No herald or porter announced him; Mr. Berbelek was already one of those whose arrival is announced only by a dull thud, a sudden silence, an infectious whisper. He knew that whisper, it was his crown, his black anthos: "Kratisticide, Kratisticide, Kratisticide."

"Esthlos."

"Esthlos."

In the Hall of the Forefathers, under the gaze of the forefathers from the dark portraits, an official dinner took place, then they went to a more intimate salon on the second floor, only the two of them now: Mr. Berbelek and Prince Neurg. More than twenty aristocrats sat down at the table for supper — and Mr. Berbelek very quickly realized according to what key they had been selected, although for they had not all been introduced to him by name, their morph (that fiery red hair!) was all too obvious: the prince had invited his closest relatives to supper with Kratisticide. Mr. Berbelek ate while being watched attentively by two dozen Neurg. They smiled, talked among themselves, exchanged gossip and jokes, in fact only glancing at him in passing and furtively. But he had no doubts. Those who spoke to him — and in the course of conversation during

the meal probably all managed to exchange a few words with him — chattered about trivial and unimportant matters. However, this is how Form is examined: it is purest where content is lacking.

Mr. Berbelek sat in the place of honor, to the right of the prince who occupied the chair at the head of the table. On his right, Kratisticide had the prince's granddaughter, the pale-faced Rumia Neurg. In the four and a half years that had passed since his last visit to the Vodenburg Palace, she had managed to grow from a flighty girl into a serious, composed woman.

Her skin, which probably did not know the rays of the sun at all, her hair like an angry flame, her ascetic dress with a corset closing her breasts and black toe shoes — seemingly everything distinguished her from Alithea, but that was where the first association ran Mr. Berbelek, toward his daughter. The slow change, taking place before our eyes, is imperceptible: we change along with the changed. Only when there are no intermediate images in memory does the real contrast become apparent. He remembered that Alithea, who had accompanied him on his previous visit to the Neurgs' palace, how she had fallen asleep in the carriage and had to be carried to bed, sleeping...

"What are you thinking, Esthlos?"

"I guess it's a sign of approaching old age, when the past begins to triumph over the present." He shook his head.

Rumia stopped her knife over the salmon.

"I remember too, that year all of the Reine froze, before you left you visited us, Esthlos, with your daughter and son. Oh, I'm sorry."

"Abel, yes."

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry."

He waved his hand with the scarf, wiping his mouth with it.

"There's no reason for you to be sorry. I've always wondered about this form. What exactly is hidden behind such expressions of sympathy? After all, it's not sympathy, only those closest to us, with whom we share a similarity of Form, are capable of it. So is it about comforting the mourner? Maybe showing respect? But to whom? To the deceased? A stranger comes and says how sorry

he is; when I know he's not. This is also at moments of such emotional tension: after death, during funerals, burnt offerings. I'm surprised there are no fights over the graves. Actually — when you think about it — Abel would probably like that, as a kind of posthumous tribute. Hmmmm."

She touched his hand.

"I simply wanted to apologize for bringing back memories of Abel."

"Why would you apologize for that? Why should I avoid remembering him? Was he a criminal, a bad, petty, and vile person?"

She smiled slightly then, tilting her head.

"No, Esthlos. He had big dreams. He told me...

"About what?"

"I thought: like son, like father."

"Rather the other way around," Mr. Berbelek muttered under his breath.

The pyrroki installation did not reach the parlor on the second floor, the servants had brought oil lamps and candlesticks there, the fire was already burning in the fireplace, the wood was crackling as it was consumed by the heat. Mr. Berbelek and the prince sat in armchairs, facing the fireplace in half-profile, from which waves of heat flowed. The windows were covered with heavy curtains. The Babylonian carpet muffled the footsteps of the servants. The light did not reach the opposite wall, there, in the corners behind the Aegean amphorae and the ancient Frankish armors, fleshy shadows grew. The doulos handed the aristocrats their pipes, they lit them. The mixture consisted of pashuba, hashish and this new Siberian herb. For a moment they blew smoke in silence.

The poker, forgotten by the servants, was stuck between the logs in the fireplace, warming up slowly — the prince reached out and withdrew his hand with a hiss. Mr. Berbelek leaned down, took out the poker without haste, the skin of his hand did not even turn red.

"Ah. Yes." The prince crossed his legs. "They say that the Moon Witch poured Fire into your veins, Esthlos."

Mr. Berbelek turned the pyrykte on his knees, the dead eyes of the phoenixes shone blindingly in the glow of living fire.

"Maybe she only melted the ice in them" he laughed. "But no, that's not true. Everyone there breathes pyr, pyr burns under their eyelids. It cleanses them, in some way burns away everything that is unnecessary, superfluous, unnecessary, thoughts, feelings and accidental features, purifies the body and morph. Sometimes they seem naive like children because of it, sometimes cruel like children."

"They say you have a home there."

"Hmmm?"

"On the Moon."

"She gave me an imopatra... a bit of land. Sometime during the full moon I will show you, Esthlos, where."

"Will you settle there?"

"Are you asking me about my plans?" Mr. Berbelek laughed again. "You know, prince, even the newspapers write about the Aetheric Fleet. There will be a great war with the Adynatos."

"It will, it won't" Neurg muttered. "Does anyone know when? In a year, in two, in ten, in a century. You yourself told us how it is impossible to talk more than two kratistoi into anything at once. Who can predict when favorable political winds will blow? Above all: can't they manage without you? So many kratistoi, Illeia herself — and these rumors, as if you were to enter directly into the Arretes Form, well, that would be suicide, worse than suicide, self-destruction, and if you, Esthlos—"

"But what exactly are you trying to convince me of, dear prince?"

Esthlos Neurg looked strangely at the Kratistoslayer, squinting behind the lime green smoke.

"Do you know the *Hymn of the Falling* by Gwidon Cordube?"

"'Falling, I see the sky moving away from me...'"

"Yes. 'He who begets does not possess, nor does he who destroys possess. He who can destroy possesses.'"

"But what is not true." Mr. Berbelek strained the smoke between his teeth. "He has a price, who can defend himself from destruction by all others."

The prince shrugged.

"In any case, they know now that they are not safe, they are not safe while you are alive."

"Oh, I realize that. My Horror have just intercepted another assassin."

"They are afraid — so you have the power. You are not a kratistos, but you can stand against them as an equal."

"Well, let's not exaggerate —"

"Listen to me, Esthlos." The prince put down his pipe and leaned in his armchair towards Mr. Berbelek, his red hair shining brightly in the glow of the dancing fire. "Since we renounced the fiefdom, we have been trying to maintain this fragile independence, balancing on a tightrope between the Powers; so age after age. After each change of balance, we must seek a new way to independence. Sometimes we have to pay for something, for example by adopting the Form of Gregory the Grim. Now we are trying to cleanse ourselves of it, perhaps we can speed things up thanks to these techniques of kalokagacia. For the ultimate goal is freedom. You ask, what freedom? Freedom to choose the Form. Of course, we will not make aristocrats out of slaves — but we can maximize the diversity among ordinary people."

"I am amazed, Prince" said the Kratisticide, somewhat amused. "You speak almost like those madmen from the sect of democrats. What would your Iaxa say to that?"

The Neurg shook his head.

"We are pragmatists, we do not intend to rebel against the natural order of things. The rule of the people would also be a kind of rule of aristocrats, only dirtier and less effective, because it requires one more lie. By definition, he who is an aristocrat is one whose Form is stronger than the one able to impose its will. Democracy is a contradiction in terms: in order to rule at all, a hierarchy

must arise, and once a hierarchy arises, not everyone will be equal. The world, life, man, everything exists thanks to the establishment of a hierarchy; equality is the ultimate cacomorphy in which every Form inevitably dissolves."

"But you spoke of freedom of choice."

"As I said, we are pragmatists. The Duchy of Neurgia is a small country, certainly the smallest sovereign fiefdom in Europe: Vodenburg and a few dozen towns, a few hundred villages. But do you know, Esthlos, what our trade balance was last year?"

"From an economic point of view, you are in a great position."

"Since the departure of Gregory the Grim, more inventions have been created in Vodenburg and more new technologies have been implemented than in Europe and Africa combined. Sophistae from all over the world are flocking to us. The Academy is expanding at an extraordinary pace; I am giving money to it, so I keep my finger on the pulse. Do you know that it is the only one in the world that brings profits? Last year we introduced a system of crediting the costs of education. We are buying out of the minds of these young people inventions that have not yet been thought of. Merchants bring goods through Vodenburg not because of the safe port, low customs, good roads, convenient location — although that helps — but because of our invoices, which increase the value of materials and raw materials two, three, four times after processing. Glass is only the most famous export. Ask your partner, Esthlos Njute. Besides, you certainly know the business of your Merchant House." The Prince straightened up in his chair, crossed his legs again. "Do you know, Esthlos, what is the source of this success? Diversity. The Mixture of Forms. It is not without reason that they call Vodenburg the Capital of Vagabonds. Whoever locks himself in one Form condemns himself to a fate of happiness; but out of a thousand Forms, one is always closer to the Goal. That is the whole secret: wide open gates. What is the opposite of diversity? The Dominance of one Form. Unimorphism."

"I understand that you do not intend to accept the offer of Kratistos Erik Helvetius?"

"We will defend ourselves until the last moment," stated Esthlos Neurg, then smiled broadly at Mr. Berbelek. "What could provide a better guarantee of freedom than an official union with the Kratistoslayer?"

The Strategos tapped the hot bowl against his knuckles.

"Of course. So anyway. Rumia, right?"

The Prince nodded.

"She is the best candidate. Of course, if for some reason you don't get —"

"Nothing, no, no way. I feel honored, really."

There was silence. The Prince was no longer smiling. Putting his fingers together, he looked at Mr. Berbelek, who was staring at the flames.

"We are ready for far-reaching political concessions," he said slowly. "The title, let's say, of Hegemon Protector. If you don't want the palace, you could live in the Gardens. Even the right of primogeniture for your and Rumia's offspring, Esthlos. Unless you go to this aether war, you will probably outlive us all. Ultimately, the principality would be yours."

"You must be really desperate."

"We discussed this offer among ourselves for a very long time. If the choice is limited to a kratistos and a kratisticide..."

"The most important thing is to maintain diversity."

"Yes."

Mr. Berbelek put down his pipe, stood up, stretched. He waved the rykte, it whistled, leaving a red afterimage in the air. He walked around the parlor, to the door and back.

Prince Neurg remained by the fireplace, watching the Strategos from under his red eyebrows.

"Of course, you don't have to answer immediately" he said. "We'll wait until the last moment. If you want to talk to Rumia —"

"I'm trying to imagine it" Mr. Berbelek muttered. "Rumia, Vodenburg, the next children, for decades, we count the revenues to the treasury and build the Alexandria of the north here..."

"If everything works out happily."

"Yeah."

Mr. Berbelek stopped at the door. Twirling the pyrykte in his fingers, he lowered his gaze and stared for a long moment at the furious heat of the pheonix's eyes.

Only the prince clearing his throat sobered the Kratisticide.

"I thought to myself," he said quietly, reaching for the doorknob, "that according to God's plan, you, prince, should have made this offer not to me, but to Abel, my son, Abel. Today, I see clearly that what should have been arranged: he and Rumia; he would have returned from Africa a different person, they would have suited each other. You would have had the blood of a Kratisticide to proclaim. As they were destined, as the Purpose was, as it should have been arranged, he should now be together next to me. But along the way something tore in the fabric of Fate, an accident that destroyed the necessary future, a trifle that denied kismet... But could I forbid him? Could I shield him from risk, win his life for him? Rumia would have married only an aristocrat of strong Form, stronger than hers. So helpless wisdom remains... So what about fathers and sons. Good night, Prince."

"Oh, oh, sorry, I thought you were at home, I didn't want to wake you, those guards made a mess."

"I'm not sleeping, I was up before dawn. Come in, Kristoff. Besides — I'm at home!

"Horror downstairs and on the stairs... Do you live in a squat now?"

"Aye."

Esthlos Njute closed the door behind him and went to the wide-open window.

"Cold," he mumbled. "I've only just arrived from Burdigala, I didn't know you'd returned to Vodenburg so quickly. There's already snow in Burdigala. Why did you move here, really?" He waved his hand, taking in the apartment, its bare walls and black linseed floor.

They were on the first floor of a scary warehouse, unused by the NIB for

a year. The Njute, Ikita & Berbelek Merchant House, after concluding long-term agreements with lunar and oroneian merchants, leased the entire Southern Docks, providing itself with all the storage space it would ever need in Vodenburg; in fact, he currently earned money by subletting these warehouses. However, the NIB also owned several warehouses in the upper port. Some of them were sold, some were leased, and the building was converted into a private hospice for the House by Ryter Njute. However, it was not a priority matter and only the renovation of the front rooms had been completed for now, while the first floor remained completely unfurnished. Mr. Berbelek ordered things from the tenement house to be moved here, but the rooms still did not give the impression of a cozy apartment. The wide open windows, through which a cold wind from the bay blew in, did not help either; the wind, the squawking of seagulls, the smell of salt and tar, the shouting of sailors and dock workers. The Kratisticide was sitting at a writing desk pushed against the wall, with his right elbow resting on the windowsill, and sipping qahwa, he was looking through some crumpled papers. He was wearing one of his white African robes; the Jerusalemite Ryter was not very familiar with the forms of southern clothing.

Having sat down on a stool next to him, he looked over Mr. Berbelek's shoulder.

"What language is that? Greek? Not Greek."

"Would you be so kind... Thank you."

"Excuse me. Listen, if you have a moment..."

"Yes?"

"Actually, I was going to write to you, we would have to talk anyway. Where do you keep the House documents? Did you leave them in the tenement house?"

Mr. Berbełek sighed, put down the goblet.

"I think I'll sell it. They've already tried to get in through the roof, they're walking between the chimneys, demolishing my roofing."

"Murderers?"

"Oh, if only they were simply sent murderers...!"

Since his return to Vodenburg, Mr. Berbełek had lived there in a state of constant siege. At first, it was kind of funny — those children shouting under the windows, offerings left by madmen (votive offerings, letters, fragments of hair and body, some misshapen figurines), processions of journalists, sophistae, lowly aristocrats consumed by ambition... Old Porte hardly left the door. So finally Mr. Berbełek set up a Horror post in front of the tenement house. But that only made matters worse; he might as well have hung out the Kratisticide banner. Groups of young people gathered, passers-by chatted up the Horror, neighbors complained about the intruders. On the street below and above, the stalls of cunning Vodenburg merchants were spread out — Ismaili, Jewish, Gypsy, Indian merchants — selling fantastic memorabilia: a fragment of the blade of the Cratisticide's dagger, his cloak, the ruby hilts of the Fourth Sword, vials with the Warlock's blood, embalmed fragments of his body, mummified mythical seventh fingers of the Seven-Fingers (dozens), treasures of the Labyrinth, portraits of the Moon Witch; and people bought it. On market days, it was simply impossible to get there by carriage or horse. Mr. Berbelek somehow endured it, although it had already become painfully obvious to him that he would eventually have to move, this house was not a suitable abode for a kratistoslayer, it had outgrown its old Form. Grown-ups do not wear children's clothes, old women do not dress in girls' clothes. Only a fool closes his eyes to a morph. However, the straw that broke the camel's back was the invasion of the democrats. The sect became active in Neurgia that summer; they did not attack Mr. Berbelek right away. However, once they had made up their minds, there was no escape from the fanatics. For them, he was the embodiment of the cult's ideals, the path to fulfilling their crazy demands. After all, the first condition of democracy is to get rid of the kratistoi; the aristocracy stands in the way of building a true polis. They knew the goal of the Kratisticide better than the Kratisticide. A jurja in the name of democracy! He will slaughter every kratistos, drive out the kings, from now on the People will rule. They crept under the windows of the tenement house, threw pebbles at them, sent letters, manifestos, petitions of supplication, chests of books by ancient and modern philosophers, one babble. They tried to cling to his carriage, surprised him in the city, sneaked into parties he attended, one even squeezed through the chimney, Mr. Berbelek shot him when the madman collapsed in the fireplace. However, it is not enough to consistently ignore madmen. Three nights ago, a young democrat set herself on fire under the windows of his tenement house, screamed for a long time, burning, woke up half the district. How pathetic it was: they betrayed their own ideals from the very beginning, recognizing the infinite superiority of the Kratisticide.

Plato truly wrote the truth: not all books are safe reading for unformed minds.

Kristoff nodded, having listened to Mr. Berbelek's story.

"I told you so. Build yourself a manor outside the city, there's still a free plot behind me. Do you have any doubts about whether you can afford it? Do you even realize how much your income is after the last renegotiation of the shares?"

"I hired an accountant from Panatakis, a clever scoundrel, he checks all the accounts for me. You don't blame me, do you?"

"Ha, I would have advised you that myself! So, are you building yourself?"

"The prince wants me to live with him in the palace."

"Even better!" Esthlos Njute jumped up. "Wait, I'll bring the papers."

He ran out (the draft slammed the door behind him) and returned immediately with a thick briefcase under his arm.

"Brrr, you're not cold here either!"

He pulled the stool up to the secretary's desk, spread out the documents; the heavy cross swung on its chain above the even rows of numbers. Mr. Berbelek watched the Herdonian with slightly surprised amusement.

"Look" Kristoff pointed with a slobbery finger at the next bills "we counted everything. Herdon is already opening, and anyway Pergamon is open, if Seven-Fingers doesn't go crazy, but with Alithea in Aegypt and your Horrors at your side he would be suicidal, so Herdon and Pergamon, but you could easily convince Neurg, I know you could, just think, Vodenburg is the only one in Europe, and we have forty-seven percent of the shares in Balthazar's air pigs invoice, and with Oroneiges from the Storm King, and he's your buddy too, he, he, he, well, you see for yourself —"

"What in Sheol are you talking about?"

"Do you remember how much we earned on the Herdonian monopoly? Here opens an opportunity a thousand times greater: the Moon. The Moon, all its treasures, the entire economy and the entire lunar market, several dozen million souls, we counted, look. First: establish direct trade. We have a great advan-

tage, years of smuggling, after all, most of it went through NIB. We can't lose this position! So, secondly: let Neurg allow the chancellor to open the duchy to the Moon. We will put masts on the port walls for the lunar boats. But, notice, they currently control the transport one hundred percent, all the aerostats capable of reaching the Moon belong to them: their aetheric machines... So, thirdly: we have to start building our own aether fleet. I consulted with the sophistae of the Vodenburg Academy. They claim that it is impossible in the terrestrial spheres. So, to start with, we would have to build a city in orbit, in the sphere of pyr and aether, here is a preliminary project, this budget is provisional, we have to talk to the Moonians first. Oh, exactly, where is that, oh so her, the Ash Lady, that bald black woman who followed you everywhere?"

"She had to go back to the Moon. You see, Kristoff, they can't stay on Earth for too long. The same applies to all aetheric machines. Each element tends toward its own sphere. Uranoise breaks out of epicycles here. Lunar boats have to re-tune themselves after each extended visit to the Earth's spheres. Multiply that budget by two. Wait, show me — do we really have that much capital?"

"We can have it at any time." Kristoff grinned at Mr. Berbelek. "You'll go to the banks, to the aristocratic houses — who would refuse the Kratisticide? Then they'll be grateful to you."

"Oh, so that's how it's supposed to look...!"

"What!" Esthlos Njute was offended. "You can't say I'm offering you bad terms, can you? Here's a twenty-year profit forecast. Do you see that? Your share. If all goes well, we'll become, alongside the kratistoi, kings and old aristocrats, the richest people in Europe!"

"Wealth, yes."

"Just don't come back to me with morals! I remember how a dozen or so years ago you thanked me for teaching you greed."

"But that was a dozen or so years ago."

"So what?"

Kristoff got furious. "Suddenly you're telling me that money doesn't matter to you anymore?!"

The kratisticide slammed his open palm against the desk and Esthlos Njute fell silent, withdrew his hands and curled up on the stool.

"Calm down," Mr. Berbelek said quietly. "I haven't made any decision yet. I see some ship of ours is entering port; go and take care of that. Leave me the papers. I'll see you in the evening at the Oriflammes."

"Yes. Fine. Sorry."

Esthlos Njute left, gently closing the door behind him.

Mr. Berbelek tried to read the letter from Aurelia for a while longer, he even returned to the letter from Janna, which had reached him a month late, because it had also been sent through Ostróg (in this letter, Janna still didn't want to give the reason why she had suddenly decided to breed headless beetles in The Gaudat Lands) — but it didn't make sense, he just skimmed the letters with his eyes.

His thoughts turned to political puzzles, those games between the kratistoi, in which he had recently become increasingly involved, for the outline of a possible coalition was already forming, the void left by the Warlock had to be filled, and the Kratisticide was helping to draw a new map of the keros, and the war with the Adynatos was one of the bargaining chips in these negotiations — those who had promised to support Illeia even before the Warlock's fall were now in better positions. Suddenly, it turned out that it was worth it to be an ally of the Moon Witch, it was worth it to gain the favor of the Kratisicide... Thoughts ran to the aetherial war fleet, gathered in the Moon's orbit, to the hosts of Hyppyroi, to Aurelia, Omixos and Hierokharis, to the Lady...

Of course he knew that a sensible man would choose the prince's proposal or Kristoff's proposal, or one of a thousand other safe alternatives — and that is what Mr. Berbelek should have done.

But—just think, Hieronim—you who created states, crowned kings, crushed the empire of the Warlock, you, with the blood of Kratistos on your hands, before whom the Powers tremble — what Goal is before you now? A peaceful, happy life of an aristocrat in this merchant country, flame-haired children, ruling in a toy principality? Or perhaps wealth, gold, more gold, trade, trade, trade — ink battles between columns of numbers?

Kristoff once gave him a book of Christian writings: mostly boring Jewish history and religious gibberish. But no book is entirely devoid of wisdom:

When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I felt like a child, I thought like a child. But when I became a man, I got rid of all that is childish.

Even the ancient Jews knew the laws of Form. One cannot lie to oneself.

So he speaks like a Kratisticide, feels like a Kratisticide, and thinks like a Kratisticide.

LUNAR cryptomancy had a long and inglorious tradition on Earth; even Babylonian astrologers could not boast of great successes here. On the other hand, lunar astrologers, who were the best informed, had no reason (or opportunity) to engage in remote observations of the Fourth Labyrinth, so their experiences could not be referred to. However, Mr. Berbelek had brought several old temple manuals from the Labyrinth Library, retrieved for him by Antidektes the Alexandrian, and it was from them that he now made use of engravings, observing the northern shore of the Sea of the Morning through a crystal spyglass from the roof of the port bakhauz. That night, there was no rain, no fog obscuring the city or clouds in the sky; such an opportunity could not be wasted. He borrowed a spyglass from the Vodenburg Academy. It was mounted on a massive tripod, two doulos moved brass hoops, directing the opticum according to Mr. Berbelek's instructions. The lights of the port and ships were bothering him a bit, he ordered a high screen to be set up from the west. Gusts of wind tore it every now and then, it was banging noisily, that was also bothersome. In general, almost everything irritated the Kratisticide lately.

Apart from him and the doulos, there were four Horrors with charged sharks on the flat roof, they were positioned in the corners of the building, but the graphite armor did not allow the silhouettes of the soldiers to be seen even in the full glow of the moon.

Mr. Berbelek had already sent for hot qahwa and vodka, surely. After two hours of observation, he was no closer to a conclusion. He was counting

on the Lady herself to decide... So Mr. Berbelek would not fall asleep, the nightmares were becoming more and more poisonous, for several minutes after waking up he was unable to say a word in any human language; he did not want to fall asleep. The bell rang one in Vodenburg, he stretched on a likot chair. The displacements of the aetheric machines moving the Labyrinth of Illeia, and therefore, the current shape of the Labyrinth — were a direct reflection of the fluctuations of the Lady's morph. The anthos of Illeia the Cruel blossomed over the pink waters of the lunar sea in the form of a configuration of sky-high uranoise constructs, all the Moonfolk knew that. The whole problem was in the proper interpretation of these shapes. The books spread out on the roof of the bakhauz around Mr. Berbelek contained engravings with maps of the Labyrinth drawn on the days of particularly important events: the Lady's great triumphs and defeats, the births of her children, the death of her son, the first attack of the Adynatos, and the like. Mr. Berbelek sat with his hands folded behind his neck, the night wind turning the heavy pages of the lunar books.

"Please, Esthlos."

Anton pushed the incunabulum aside with his foot and placed a tray with a bowl of steaming qahwa, a bottle of pazhubovka, a mug and a salt shaker next to it.

Mr. Berbelek poured himself some vodka and swallowed it in one gulp.

"Esthlos..."

"What's the matter?" The Kratisticide growled at Anton, surprised that he hadn't left yet. He relented at the sight of the servant's panicky reflex. "Yes, Anton?"

"If you had a moment now, Esthlos..."

"Speak, speak."

Anton glanced nervously from side to side, as if afraid of being overheard by the doulos or Horrors.

"I would like to ask your permission, Esthlos..."

"Yes?"

“I want to get married.“

Mr. Berbelek froze in mid-motion, with a tilted bottle of pazhubovka and a cup in his hands, and burst out laughing.

Anton was even more embarrassed. Mr. Berbelek noticed that he was now trying to escape unnoticed from the roof, so after pouring the alcohol and putting the bottle down, he waved at the servant beckoning.

“Don’t run away from me now. If I was laughing at anyone, it was probably myself. Do I know her?“

“She’s a cousin of one of Esthle Latek’s housemaids. An Aegyptian, we’re corresponding now. That’s it —“

“You’d move to Alexandria.”

“Your palace there, Esthlos, is almost empty, someone to keep an eye on the slaves would be useful.”

“You didn’t tell me her name.”

Anton lowered his gaze.

“Mandisa, daughter of Heppus and Izdihar, from Ablatop.”

“Mandisa. Mandisa, so Sweet Hmmm.” Mr. Berbelek turned the stinging pazhubovka in his mouth. ”You know that Porte and Tereza will stay here.”

“Yes, Esthlos.”

“This is one of those choices that decides your entire life; one of the few that we are aware of at the moment of making. This way or that way” Mr. Berbelek pointed his hand with the cup to the left and right “toward such Anton or such Anton.”

“Yes. I know. I really thought everything through.”

“You have my permission, you have it. Give me the date of the wedding, I will certainly not forget about gifts. Don’t worry, I will not appear in person.“

”We would be so honored, Esthlos! Only that...“

“I know, I know, under the aura of Nebuchadnezzar, a kratistoslayer at the wedding would not be a good omen.” Mr. Berbelek took two sips of the cold pazhubovka vodka. “Come here. Come. Stand here. Wait... Oh, now. Lean over, look into that eyepiece. Tell me what you see.“

Anton carefully brought his eye closer to the telescope.

”I don’t know, Esthlos, some kind of pattern... I don’t know what it is.”

”But what does it remind you of? Go on. First thought.”

”A net. For catching fish. Only it glows.”

”A net.”

”Or a red-hot iron for branding cattle and madmen.”

”Oh.”

”Excuse me.”

”No, thanks. Can I pour you some? You’ll warm up. Here.”

”Kkkch! Ugh. Can I ask... do you read the stars, Esthlos?”

”You probably won’t believe me when I tell you that’s what politics is all about.”

”Esthlos...”

”Yeah. So tell me, Anton, what kind of future do you see for yourself at your sweetheart’s side? Not in the stars, but in your dreams, in your plans.”

“Well, how about we get married, have children...”

“You’ll get married, have children — and what?”

“What: what? I don’t understand, Esthlos.”

“That’s it? That’s all?” Mr. Berbelek smiled ironically. “In this, Anton, son of Porte, will find peace, happiness and contentment?”

“Really, I didn’t think about it, Esthlos. Well, of course, in childhood everyone dreams of some incredible adventures, that they will gain fame, wealth,

power, God knows what they will do. But everyone also grows up later. These are fairy tales, and in life there is work and eternal fatigue and lice in the bedclothes, excuse me, Esthlos. And I, with you, have seen with my own eyes more than half of these aristocrats. Esthlos. A child does not distinguish: whether he can jump from such a height and not get hurt, or throw himself at a behemoth and not die, or become a Leonidas, a king. But he learns.“

“Bah! People become Leonidases, kings, Anton.”

“I know, Esthlos. But a person also quickly learns to recognize: who will be the king and who will not. Only really small children confuse doulos with aristocrats.“

”Oh, no, watch out, you sound like a sophistes yourself,” laughed Mr. Berbelek.

Anton put down his cup.

”It’s that pazhubovka... They make it in The Skoliodoi, don’t they? It twists the tongue and the mind.“

”Let’s not exaggerate, not in The Skoliodoi... Besides, in fact all alcohols are the fruits of the Distortion, catalysts of social cacomorphies...”

Mr. Berbelek stood up, looked around the roof, jumped over the spread-out books. He looked back at Anton.

”Gather this up and take it downstairs.”

”Esthlos.“

“— When you have those children and grandchildren,” smiled Mr. Berbelek, “don’t forget to tell them about this: When I was drinking vodka with The Kratisticide on the roof over Vodenburg at night...”

“In time, they’ll learn to tell fairy tales from reality,” replied Anton, not looking at Mr. Berbelek.

“Of course.” The form has already been broken, the moment has passed, there’s no way to continue the conversation in this tone.

Mr. Berbelek went down to the upper floor of the bakhauz. The oil lamps

hanging on the bare walls were burning at a quarter wick. He went from semi-darkness into darkness as he slammed the door of the corner front room, the one he had designated as his study, shut behind him. The windows were closed now. He called the doulos.

He threw off his humyia coat and waistcoat, chose a winter apple from the bowl of fruit left on the windowsill, took a bite; He wiped his beard with the sleeve of his silk shirt. The doulos bustled around behind him. He looked at the lights of the port, at the ships marked with signal lamps moored in the bay, the moon reflected on the dark waves. Gradually, however, the room grew brighter and brighter, and Mr. Berbelek's night view was obscured by his own reflection. The Kratisticide ate the apple.

He sat down at the bureau. From the drawer he took a new, clean sheet of luxurious parchment. He dipped his pen in ink. THE LAST WILL OF HIERONIM BERBELEK, WRITTEN IN HIS OWN HAND ON THE TWENTY-FIRST OF OCTOBRIS OF THE YEAR ONE THOUSAND HUNDRED NINETY-EIGHT AFTER THE FALL OF ROME.

There is no point in dramatizing — he thought, watching a black drop form on the blade of his pen — but since I have already made a decision, I cannot close my eyes to its consequences. Because it is true that even if I succeed, even if I kill the Adynatos Kratistos and survive — Mr. Berbelek will most likely not survive. How far have we managed to penetrate the depths of the African Skoliodoi? Leonidasi and kings and kratistoslayers must also be able to distinguish fairy tales from reality.

If something survived — not Mr. Berbelek — a shred, a reflection, a shadow — then rather Anton will seek a small peace and a small happiness, dreams and feelings slow, soft, delicate — like a snowflake soothing hot skin — a snowflake, Loilei, wasn't that her name — the touch and love of an angel, then maybe he will be able to endure — him, anyone. If anything survives at all.

A black drop falls on the parchment.

Everything will be fine. But if something should happen, thus decreed Esthlos Hieronim Berbelek-z-Ostrog known as the Kratisticide: The executor of the will in everything is to be Esthlos Kristoff Njute. As for my earthly and lunar wealth,

money, valuables, movables and real estate, and shares in business ventures: to my only daughter, Esthle Alithea Monshebe Latek, because she will inherit nothing more —

$\chi\cdot$
Like The Warlock

The day she arrived in Vodenburg, the first snow had fallen on the city and the streets were full of cold mud, animals and vehicles splashing heavy goo on pedestrians. The woman, who had introduced herself at the Third Skelli Hospice as Esthle Juno von Versceck, arrived already dressed in winter attire: leather shalwars, a Nordling kurta, a sable cloak with a large hood. She ordered all the luggage to be taken to her rooms, but she didn't even look inside. She hired a cab and had herself taken to the Kratisticide's house. She paid in British denarii. In the cab, having thrown off her hood (her hair was whiter than snow), she nervously smoked tobacco.

She was clearly surprised when the cabman turned towards the port; but she was silent. They stopped at a scary stone caras above the loading quay, in the shadow of a massive bakhauz. The woman took a letter from her sleeve, sealed with a heraldic trail seal, and ordered the cabman to deliver it to the Kratisticide. Which of course was not part of his job; he passed the paper to one of The Horrors who answered the knocking on the high gate of the bakhauz. The woman remained in the carriage. She smoked the tobacco without a word.

She finished one, started another, then another and another, the snow was falling again, she had to pay the cabman. He was sitting on the box wrapped in a flannel cape. The woman pulled her hood back on, only her hands in deerskin gloves were moving now. Children chased each other along the quay, throwing snowballs at each other and shouting vulgar rhymes about the Kratisticide, the

Warlock and the Moon Witch. Noon passed, the azan, the call to prayer of the followers of Muhammad, resounded from the Vodenburg minarets. The woman waited.

Only after the seventh cigarette she smoked did an old servant of the Vodenburg Morph appear in the side door of the bakhauz. A Horror with a shark in his hands let him through and stood in the threshold. The old man approached the cab.

"The Esthlos requests your presence."

Throwing the cigarette butt into the snow, the woman followed the servant. She dismissed the cab with a short movement of her gloved hand.

They entered the bakhauz. The old man led them straight to the stairs. The warehouses were empty, only in one side room she saw a few Horrors without armor, they looked back at her as she passed.

It was a bit warmer upstairs, she threw back her hood, unlaced her fur coat. It smelled of some African incense here. In the main corridor, there were piles of packages, crates, trunks. The doulos had hung Moscow tapestries on the walls.

The old man knocked and went into the room at the end of the corridor; in front of this door stood a Horror. For a moment they looked at each other in silence, the soldier of the Lakadaemonic morph and the white-haired Esthle. On his graphite breastplate he had an engraving of Achilles posing for a javelin throw.

The servant opened the door.

"Come in, Esthle."

She entered.

The Kratisticide stood behind a table covered with papers, facing the window open to the snow, the port, and the sea, and leafed through a large book held in his left hand.

He looked up for a moment.

"Porte."

The old man bowed and went out, gently closing the door behind him.

The woman took off her coat, threw it on the sofa, took off her gloves, threw them on the coat. After looking around the room, she shrugged and sat down next to him. She crossed her legs, clasped her hands on her knee.

"What are you reading?"

"Ancient astrological gibberish," he muttered. "What people can come up with...Aristarthus of Samos, Seleucus, even Pythagoras claimed that all the planets revolved around the sun. Can you imagine that? — also on Earth. Although some things might be useful. I have to check Archimedes' treatise On the Counting of Sand, there he calculated the diameter of the sphere of fixed stars, but he seems to have been off by several orders of magnitude. In turn, Apollonius of Perga's epicyclic theory was partially correct, as were Alcibiades of Gerua's maps of the aether tides, so —"

"Where did you bury him?"

"In Africa. In the savannah, by the Turtle River. I have a map, if —"

"May you rot in Sheol for eternity."

"What did you come for?"

"You know."

He looked up from the book a second time.

"Are they still after you? All right, I'll recommend you to Neurg, he'll take you under his wing, to the palace."

"I was sure that the noble Kratisticide would protect me," she drawled.

"Yes, you have a talent for exploiting people, I don't deny it. What exactly did you do there?"

"All slander."

"Hmm."

"You, of all people, should believe me, great strategos. How many people have you destroyed in a similar way with your secret plans? Some of the victims

probably believe in their own guilt after all. Not me.“

“Sure. You never.”

With a jerk of her head she threw her hair back.

“Oh, I am guilty, I am. That I ever sent the children to you.”

“Tell that to Alithea.”

“I’ll write to her, don’t be afraid; the first thing I do.”

“Why didn’t you go straight to Alexandria? The Hypathia would have protected you just as well, if not better. Oh, yes, you’re not sure she wouldn’t throw you out the gates of the city! So first a letter. You were always the most convincing in letters.

“A person changes, I do not know her current Form,” she muttered. “I am someone else, she is someone else.”

“But you were sure about me, weren’t you” The Kratisticide smiled ironically.

There was a knock at the door. A Horror decurion peered inside. He exchanged a few quick words with the Kratisticide; at the end he bowed low and withdrew into the corridor.

The woman stood up, approached the table. She ran her hand over the tabletop, maps and books, brushed the uranoise astrolabe with her fingertips, a light blue perpetual motion machine doomed to tragic death... The Kratisticide watched her from under lowered eyelids. She didn’t come any closer, he was taller than her by more than a pous.

”Yes,” she whispered, ”Now they fall on their knees before you, now you are powerful again, even more powerful.”

”Didn’t you love me like that?” He replied just as quietly. ”Didn’t you leave me because I lost this morph?”

”I left you?” She sucked in a breath. “Do you remember that? You left yourself, you ran away from us! Four months, you still hadn’t recovered from Kolenica, you could barely stand on your feet. The middle of winter, frost like

Thor, Posen covered in snow, but you take a sleigh and go, we had seen so much of you. You couldn't stand our presence, no one close to you who remembered you from before Kolenica. Why did I love you: not for your victories, conquests and fame. But for who you were despite them.“

Closing the book loudly, the Kratisticide burst out laughing. The laughter was loud, deep, it was certainly heard down in the port.

”Because I believe that! And the rich are loved despite their gold!“ He put the book aside, extinguished his laughter. “But you couldn't love me despite my victories, when those victories were gone.”

She raised her head, wanted to look him in the eye, but she couldn't hold it for even a second. She turned her gaze to the sea.

“Only now there is no longer even that ‘despite‘” she said. “I see only the Kratisticide. Hieronim Berbelek would only pollute the morph.”

“I will drink to his unfortunate life in the evening.”

He irritated her again.

“Do you think that the Warlock let you go then because you showed such strength? That you defeated him? What did you tell me yourself? Think about it. What is the victory of the Kratisticide? Not murder, not destruction, any slave is capable of that. A kratistos, on the other hand, wins by imposing his Form.”

She embraced her chest with her arms, as if a cold wind from the sea had finally broken through her jacket.

”I let you go, left, because I saw it well, I knew you like no one else did I saw that Hieronim Berbelek had returned from Kolenica then.”

”As who?”

”The Warlock's Rat!” she snapped. ”Now you've grown a thousandfold.”

He laughed a second time.

”Laugh, laugh!” She charged at him, no longer looking away. He looked at her with interest, tilting his head slightly. ”They tolerate you,” she said,

quickly and faster, merging the Vistuli words together "because they need you. They chose the raw material, forged their weapons... I would like to meet that blacksmith. You don't see it anymore; only someone who knew you well for a long time... I read the newspapers, I thought it all out well — and now I see that I was right. The Witch needed a kratisticide for the Adynatos, but she knew that anyone strong enough to defeat a kratistos was therefore too strong for her to control, so she wouldn't go to perdition, into battle, into the heart of cacomorphy, but would carve out her fortune on Earth. How to solve the insoluble paradox of Form and force? Exactly like this: find the unfortunate man at the moment of his fall, at the moment of weakness — and then impose Form on him. You have risen and are what she wanted you to become. But when you have fulfilled your task... They will exile you or kill you. For there is one thing they cannot tolerate: A kratistos killer, an eternal threat to them, a man about whom it is already known with certainty — and who knows with certainty this about himself — that he is capable of standing before a kratistos, raising his hand against him, killing him. You are a thorn in the side of every kratistos, a sword of Damocles hanging over the heads of the Powers. There will be no place for you on Earth. Nor on the Moon, for that matter, do you expect mercy from Illeia the Cruel? Did she ever promise you a reward, an eternal life of peace, sanctuary? No. She won't. Even if you somehow survive, if you survive the Aether War —they will banish you, Hieronim, they will kill you."

He nodded. He reached out his hand to her face, her pale cheek.

"I know."

She recoiled from his touch. He smiled, without a trace of irony.

"You're right, you're right about everything. So understand: this is my nature. I want this, I dream of this battle, it's my goal."

"What nonsense are you telling me?"

"Write to her as soon as possible. Maybe you'll make it in time to name your granddaughter. Now we'll go to the palace, I'll introduce you to the prince. Have you caught a cold? Here, blow your nose. Porte! Hot qahwa! Close those damned windows. Send the Esthle's luggage to... Where are you staying?"

Ψ.
Fleets, Armies, Horrors

RRRDUMM, rrrdumm, rrrdurnrnmmm, war pours out across the borders of the Golden Kingdoms and the earth shakes under the feet of beasts.

From Am-Shasa and Am-Tuur, from the Eastern Kingdoms and from the deceptive desert images, from the heart of Sadara, from there the armies of Aegypt emerged. First hundreds, thousands of savages, primitives of half-animal morph. As they were hired, so they were driven: by tribes, villages, families. They marched on foot, barefoot, with darts, shields, bows, kurroi and blowpipes, with leather bundles on their backs and heads, to the terrible clamor of barbarian music. Then the mercenary armies from the north and the east, including the Urals and Indians; long processions of wagons, animals, war machines. At night, smoke from bonfires obscures a quarter of the constellation. Then the Column of Horror, with all its camp and all supporting services. Then the armies of Upper and Lower Aegypt, formations with a thousand-year tradition under ancient banners, Hessian and Nehesian Mamluks, the Guard of Anubis, Crocodiles sworn to Nebuchadnezzar. Among them — Nebuchadnezzar the Golden himself, hidden behind muslin curtains, in a house rocking on the back of a white elephant morphed to an unprecedented size, surrounded by dozens of other elephants, painted in the yellow-brown colors of Aegypt, surrounded by thousands of riders mounted on war zebras, xewras and unicorns. Drums beat, the earth trembles. Shepherds following the army for half a day lead large herds of cattle: meat for the army. The procession passes through the golden savannah, leaving behind a stadium-wide trail of trampled grass and torn earth,

all the animals have fled from here, already fleeing the approaching war. The army moves during the day, at night it stops in gigantic camps, cities of tents and fire that last several hours. Slowly but inexorably it heads south, towards the Dry River, towards the Crooked Lands.

From the cities of Hajjar and Reboeum, from the Western Kingdoms, the Hurathi armies emerged, not much smaller than the Aegean ones. They are also accompanied by a Column of Horror. Equally numerous are the mercenary armies of the Sea People. Ligator Hurath III personally leads the armies. In a cage of gold and silk, watched over by the blind Nameless Ones, on a platform pulled by sixty-six howols travels Kratistos Joseph the Just. Since no one knows his face, tales circulate in the night camps of a silent stranger, sneaking under the stars among the tents and campfires and listening from the shadows to the conversations of the Hurathians. Whoever utters a lie in his presence will never utter another word. Hyenas and jackals gather at the edge of the light, the wolves of the desert, scavengers circle the sky. But with each passing day the Hurathians see more animals they cannot name. On the southern horizon, clouds of evil colors, purple, yellow, black, are swirling.

From the east, from the depths of the dry sands of Jazirat al-Arab, from the land of living khamsins and haboobs, from under the shadow of Al-Kaba, having sailed the Erythraean Sea and crossed the Nile, the armies of the Ismailis, the princes of the desert, are marching towards Skoliodoi, for the first time in hundreds of years, tribes and semi-robber clans united under one hegemony—hundred after hundred, after hundred of riders wrapped in black and white robes and burnooses, on dromedaries, humyias, horses and zebras, with ancient single-barrel keraunets at their saddles, in trouffes wrapped under turbans so tightly that only the eyes are visible between the material. Hammud Kasr Taken from Pala is in command. They plunder and pillage the villages of savages, villages and small towns they pass on their way, they take people alive into slavery, they break up caravans of desert salt gatherers. There are several skirmishes with Axum patrols. Somewhere among these thousands of riders wrapped in desert robes is an old kratistos, one of these riders is Ephrem of the Sands, Father Beard, who played chess and wrote down the words of the Kratistos Muhammad the Prophet, even meeting him face to face on the night of his death, and whose blow split the Kaba. The blue above the Ishmaelites remains pure, not a drop of rain has fallen on them. Behind the army trail bewildered djinn, at dusk they can be seen on the horizon, clouds of red dust, dirty whirlpools of ge.

Under the Junian sun, under the African sky, wading through the still air, the armies reach the border of the Warp, one after another, at intervals of four and seven days, three and five thousand stadia. They crossed this border and entered The Skoliodoi, as far as the cacomorphic jungle allowed them: to its edge and a little further, until people begin to die, too many people. Here camps are set up. The Strategos expected attacks by the Adynatos from the depths of the cacomorphy, so the orders included the construction of all possible fortifications in these conditions. Normally axes would be useless here, but in the anthos of the human kratistoi, trees fall under them, and fire consumes the nearest undergrowth — and so three temporary strongholds are created in the wild heart of Africa, cities of the Powers, front-line garrisons on the front of the Arretes War: Nebuchadnezzar's Aporeum, Joseph's Myta, Ephrem's Isaf. War with what is Other, does not consist in destruction — truly Other will not be destroyed anyway, man can only destroy as man. War with what is Other consists in making it less other, more human. Only then can it be destroyed, only in this way.

So the battle was fought in the keros, anthropomorph against cacomorphy, anthos of kratistos against Distortion. How far into the jungle can one go? Can you name these trees yet? These animals? This sky? Can you tell me your dreams yet? They sent dozens of troops into the depths, then based on the descriptions of the diseases that were afflicting them, they drew front lines, plans of offensives; and the soldiers quickly regained their morph in the hot embrace of the aura of the kratistoi. They began to clear the jungle in two directions from Isaf, building roads to the center of the Skoliodoi. At night, they were consumed by the cacomorphy; during the day they were remade. Deeper and deeper. Around Myta monkeys appeared in the branches of the trees in the Form of monkeys, ants and termites in the Form of ants and termites returned to the earth.

On the 14th of Quintilis, the Adynatos launched a counterattack, striking directly at Aporeum; perhaps they sensed Nebuchadnezzar's weakness. The battle lasted a night, a day, and part of the second night. Over fifteen hundred people died; as many never regained their Form, never emerging from their madness until their deaths. The newspapers of Alexandrian Africa later wrote about the Army of Madmen. Fortunately, Nebuchadnezzar himself survived. Thanks to this, the Aegyptians could even recall the Aporean Battle, thanks to this, it was told and remembered. The newspapers wrote about the Sheol monsters, the hosts of metamorphic creatures, neither animals nor plants, neither living

nor dead, about the wave of furious Distortion, under which even the hardiest Horrors lost their senses and Form, falling into dementia and sudden illnesses. Some of those advanced to the most distant positions completely lost themselves in the advancing cacomorphy, mixed with it and merged Forms; thus the wave grew stronger. At a certain moment, even the elements began to mix, Water in place of Air, Air in place of Earth, Earth in place of Fire, the world around Aporeum turned inside out — it seemed that nothing could resist such perversion. However, we must give credit to Nebuchadnezzar the Golden: he did not retreat, he did not surrender to The Skoliodoi, his elephants stood unmoved, the hegemons issued coherent orders from their backs, the words still made sense, the commands still made sense, the army maintained the Form of the army. Here, in the immediate vicinity of the kratistos, the pyr ignited like pyr and the body died like the body. However, it was not necessary to allow the cacomorphy too close, a relatively safe distance remained thirty, forty pous. Thus, during the battle itself, a new tactic was hastily developed, primitive, but the only possible one: a barrage of fire from all the pyresiders and keraunets, from the perimeter of the fortification erected around the positions of Nebuchadnezzar's Crocodiles. The Adynatos, for their part, if they had any strategy at all in this chaos, it was equally unsophisticated: flood the aggressor with Twisted Matter, flood him with Twisted Form.

At dusk on the 15th of Quintilis, however, the beginnings of a formation and the first attempts at organized military maneuvers were noticed in the ranks of the cacomorphic creatures. Nebuchadnezzar's victory was known as this: The Skoliodoi wanted to fight like men. Newspapers wrote about the panicky retreat of the Adynatos and the miraculous rebirth of African nature. Towards the end of Quintilis, when the anthos of the kratistoi had already eaten tens and hundreds of stadia into the Crooked Lands, constellations of new stars lit up in the sky over Africa. Soon they became visible during the day as well. In Aporeum, Mycie and Isaf they responded by lighting large pyroglyphs on the savannah. The Strategos ordered the troops to withdraw from The Skoliodoi. All work ceased, even those who had been posted on guard only raised their heads in silent expectation. Thus passed the day, evening and night. In the morning the heavens fell.

The first pyrownik struck fifty stadia south of Myta. They did not see the Fire descend from its sphere, not a single scar from the release of pyro remained on the blue. For a brief moment the whole sky simply became blindingly white — and those who watched were indeed blinded — after which the thunder of a

thousand storms rolled over Myta and a hot wind struck the camp, a whirlwind carrying pure arche pyr. A dozen or so tents caught fire, and some of the Hurathians' clothes and hair caught fire. They alone were concerned; the rest looked south, over the jungle of motley cacomorphy, where a gigantic column of dark red smoke rose hypnotically slowly towards the Sun, curving from the top into the shape of a mushroom with a folded cap.

The Lady's astromekanists worked uninterrupted, following the orders of the Kratisticide, releasing a pyrownik every hour, an hour and a half, as soon as they could keep up with tuning the celestial spheres. Myta, Isaf, Myta, Aporeum, Aporeum, Myta, Aporeum, Isaf, Myta, Myta, from dawn to dusk. Then at night, which each time the pyrownik was released they burned through, leaving an afterimage of deadly red on the pupils, calling out of the soft darkness millions of razor-sharp moths, waking all the animals and people, the entire jungle. The Strategos ordered the camps to be moved back a dozen or so stadia from its border, the wind was very variable, at any moment a wave of consuming fire could come from The Skoliodoi. Nimrods were sent to the tops of the tallest trees to report on the progress of the fire. The night horizon was covered with black smoke, the southern stars were completely invisible. When the wind blew from that side, the smell of burning stung the nostrils. At dawn, black snow began to fall: flakes of ash carried by currents of hot air. Animals and creatures of less specific Form fled from The Skoliodoi to the savanna, individually and in herds, animals and creatures of less specific Form, increasingly misshapen and difficult to describe. Keraunetswere already thundering almost continuously against the cacomorphs, when people were killing monsters as if during some monstrous jurja, hundreds of them. thousands of cacomorphs driven straight under their barrels. The nimrods spoke of a crown of fire encircling the entire southern horizon, of a twisted jungle twisting and morphing at the touch of the dust like a worm being burned alive.

The Skoliodoi burned.

"LADY".

"Humble yourself."

"You summoned me."

"When I summoned you before, you did not come."

"I did not have time."

"Hieronim Berbelek did not have time. Do not approach!"

"I do not approach."

"Do you see the ren stone by the stream?"

"Yes."

"Unfold your chain mail."

"It's heavy."

"Pure ge. But the Form — the Form must be like this."

"A Crooked Sword. Of course."

"The Skolioxyfos. Raise it. Higher. Look at the ground."

"What is it?"

"It's shadow. The Skolioxyfos Distorts everything, even light. If a man of weaker Form took it in his hand — it would not remain a hand for long. If you can't just hang it by the pommel tooth, wrap it in this Purinic chainmail. It should last long enough."

"Hmm. The blade is completely dull."

"The Skolioxyfos is not for cutting Matter."

"I have such a dagger..."

"Your dagger is for people. The Skolioxyfos cuts keros, no matter whose, what morph is imprinted in it. Human, Adynatos, kratistos, God, the world itself. Use it with great caution, three great teknitoi went mad forging this weapon."

Mr. Berbelek swung Skolioxyfos around the mill and struck a boulder over the stream from above his shoulder. The boulder melted, flowed into the water,

there with a hiss it split into a thousand fiery dragonflies, which immediately soar into the sky above the Lady's grove, flitting in a red cloud across the green shield of the Earth.

"Yes."

"I know you are tempted. You had better go."

"You know nothing, woman. You can only hope."

"Go."

"Sophistes Antidektes believes that you brought them here deliberately, that this was the beginning of your plan to regain power over the Earth without having to leave the Moon. You will remain here, but your morph will take over the kingdoms of the Below with equal inevitability. They were right to suspect you from the very beginning. Your daughter, my daughter, you — one Lady. Up to now I have been inclined to think that you are simply taking advantage of the situation, as any kratistos would; you could not have known about the Adynatos, you could not have planned what comes from beyond the fixed stars. But now I begin —"

"This machine in the sky above us — her perpetua mobilia rotate around the axis of my heart, you will not have time to raise your sword, and aether will grind you into arche."

"Not today, but someday I will see fear on your face."

"Go away."

"You can only hope that I will not survive the meeting with Arretes's kratistos. But I will survive it, I have seen my kismet and I tell you that I will survive and return, I will stand before you then and —"

"Go away!"

"I do not know when, but one day, face to face —"

"Away!"

"I will thank you for everything you have done for others."

"Hierokharis!"

"See you soon, Illeia."

She had long, black hair, slightly slanted eyes, heavy and rounded breasts, wide hips, dark womb; similar and unlike her daughter. She has long, black hair, slightly slanted eyes. She has long, black hair. Long, black. Black. She had long, black hair, slightly slanted eyes, heavy and rounded breasts — no, that's not what he saw, it's just a memory. He looks back, his gaze disappears in the thicket of stocky birch trees, too late.

But he will still have a chance to look at the Lady, she won't be able to escape him. He hugs Skolioxyfos tighter. She will have long, black hair...

On 13 Sextilis 1199 PUR, a fleet of one hundred and thirty-five aether boats in the hegemony of the Kratisticide left the spheres of Earth and the Moon. On board the boats were fourteen kratistos and kratistas, two thousand one hundred and eighty-seven Fire Riders, twenty-nine of the most skilled lunar astromekans.

They say that the clocks of the entire world went back three seconds when the fleet left the sphere of Earth.

They say that the Moon changed color — from pink to almost yellow — when Illeia the Cruel left it.

They say that on Earth, after the thirteen Powers had left it, furious storms raged for long weeks, the Okeanic currents changed their course, schools of fish changed feeding grounds, tens of thousands of Earthlings fell into madness, fell ill with leprosy and cancer, people and animals were born with extra limbs, with split spines, without vital organs, plants blossomed and fruited too early or too late, and beasts forgotten for millennia were born from mud, earth, water and warmth. Every night, swarms of falling stars swept across the sky.

The *Mameruta*, blacker than a Horror's armor, the largest of the lunar moths, in which Mr. Berbelek placed the command of the fleet, also carried on board a dozen or so lunar astrologers. From inside the moth's segmented head, through complicated machines of smoky glass, they constantly observed the revolutions of the celestial spheres and the disturbances in the course of the planets. Then,

in likot astrolabes, powered by aetheric perpetua mobilia, they calculated the disturbances in the harmony of the sky, finding the astronomical points of the Distortion. This is how the trajectory of the Arretes Fleet was plotted.

The Kratisticide and his staff — the Hyppyroi hegemons and the starship captains, the rats of the kratistos and the sophistae of the Labyrinth — tried to predict the direction of the Adynatos' further journey on this basis, in order to choose the most convenient place for battle. Astrologers had quite precise records of the Adynatos' journeys from the last dozen or so years. However, they were unable to indicate any regularities in them, the Distortion seemed to move through the aetheric spheres completely randomly, that is, chaotically — no human thought could be discerned in this.

Which was to be expected, of course, but nevertheless made it very difficult to organize an effective ambush for the enemy. The Kratisticide planned an attack strategy that would make maximum use of the Lunar Fleet's assets. On the onyx-mirror walls of the Blind Eye inside the head of the *Mameruta*, he drew orbits, epicycles and winding trajectories. When she was not sleeping, Aurelia often visited him, watched as he moved artificial planets, ceramic armadas and hordes of filigree winged Fire Riders across the artificial sky with his phoenix-like rykte. Aurelia found herself aboard the *Mameruta*, since the *Urkaj* of the knight Omixos Zarnik was not part of the Lunar Fleet, she was assigned to another task. Having repeatedly ventured into the spheres of the Earth, having spent hundreds of hours there, the *Understar* required a general retuning. Since it had to be left in the orbit of the Moon for a long time anyway, it seemed a natural candidate for the mission planned by the Academy of the Fourth Labyrinth. Namely, someone should finally break through the sphere of fixed stars, fly beyond the kingdom of aether and look into the world unimaginable to man, into those demorphic abysses from where the Adynatos came.

Since the *Urkaj* flies there, its hegemon, Omixos Zarnik, will fly. Since Zarnik, Aurelia Kruzos will fly. The Lady also assigned her eidolus to the mission. Quickly, through the Labyrinth Academy, the sophistes Antidektes the Alexandrian gained a place on the *Understar*, which in turn did not make Aurelia happy. In any case, now all her thoughts were occupied with the approaching great battle with the Adynatos; after all, there was no guarantee that she would survive it to take part in the *Urkaj*'s expedition. There was no guarantee that the battle would be won and that any of the humans would survive.

In the meantime, the *Understar* had to be re-tuned and partially rebuilt. The lunar sophistae prepared plans for various mechanisms and safeguards for the expected otherworldly oppressions. The Scorpion of Zarnik would remain in orbit above Abazon for at least four months.

Aurelia had access to the head of the *Mameruta*, because the Ryter Omixos Zarnik was on the Kratisticide's staff, his cabin was also located in the head of the black-aetheric moth.

Each time the Hyppyres entered the Blind Eye, it distracted the Strategos from the battle taking place on the walls, ceiling and floor, the delicate glow of the bare pyr skin scattered thousands of shadows around the room. Although Aurelia always remembered to calm her heart and breathing first. Only when the Kratisticide seemingly stopped paying attention to her could she talk to him freely. She also tried not to look directly at him, did not come too close and moved away from his gaze.

The Kratisticide indicated the current location of Skoliodoi with his pyrykta.

"They do not descend to the subsolar spheres, now they are following the epicycle of Jupiter. The solar aether will carry us here, and just below the sphere of Jupiter, we will unfold the Flower. We will lock them there, if only they do not suddenly turn back. But even if — the Jovian aether is so fast... We have a good chance."

Aurelia knew the rules of stellar navigation well, the laws built over the centuries by Eudoxus, Aristotle, Provega, Orte Hassan, Borelius and others. Around the Earth rotate the spheres of aether, the densities of the orbits of uranoysis, arranging themselves into the relatively harmonious mechanics of the sky. Each sphere carries its star — a planet or the Sun — built of cyphers characteristic of a given sphere, binding uranoysis with the arche of other elements; in the Sun, for example, pyr is mainly bound. The spheres move at different speeds and at different angles. It is not as divinely perfect a movement as the first philosophers and astrologers imagined, because aether does not stick to one center, almost always entering deferents, even minimal ones, and jumping into orbits around even higher epicycles. Provega even claimed that for aether there is no such thing as a "first deferent" — there are only epicycles, with a deviation and eccentricity noticeable or imperceptible to the human eye.

On these epicycles, therefore, the Moon, Mercury, Venus, Sun, Mars, Jupiter,

Saturn orbit the Earth. Moving away from the Earth, we fly into spheres with different average speeds and directions of rotation of uranoise. So the sails are unfurled, the wings are spread and, by manipulating the angle of their inclination and using the numerology of the material they are made of, the aether is caught racing along the orbit along which the boat is to be pulled. To move through the celestial spheres or against them, one must tack carefully in the epicycles of the lighter aether. This is how one sails through the sky.

From the analysis of the Warp's movements, it appeared that the Adynatos were also dependent on celestial mechanics; otherwise, the Kratisticide could not have dreamed of surprising them and surrounding them in open space. However, he still had an extremely complicated navigational task to solve.

Aurelia watched as he practiced the next variants of the encircling maneuver, called the Flower, in the onyx sky. The Lunar Fleet should unfold before the Warp like a spring shoot and close around the Adynatos like a sundew. The beauty of the maneuver was that after the Fleet had been brought to its initial positions, that is, after the Adynatos had left the faster epicycles, the entire further movement of both the Lunar and Arretes Fleets would result solely from celestial astrometry and the Flower should close by itself, like some intricate mechanical trap, a deadly perpetual motion machine.

Aurelia was already able to see this beauty, the aura of the Strategos had embraced her to such an extent that she recognized his Form even in what did not exist, let alone what had just been conceived.

The most beautiful plan is one that is self-fulfilling.

The god of the Strategos did not create the world. He only provoked it into existence.

"The first problem," the Kratisticide pressed his hand to the cold sky, "how to approach them so that they would notice us only when it was too late for them, when the machine would snap shut? We cannot approach in the plane of the ecliptic, the Sun would certainly display us, if not on the first, then on the second orbit. Do the Adynatos observe the sky? They will notice the eclipses of the fixed stars. Our only chance is speed. We will descend to the Curve at the full speed of the pyr cyphers, the aether of the Sun. However, the sophistae and mekanics predict significant losses after entering the sphere of Jupiter, in such a brutal tack the uranoise of the higher orbits will cut our wings."

The Kratisticide spoke with his back to her, his head raised and his arms embracing the onyx slope, as if he were indeed the Atlas of this cosmos, as if the interruption of the Sun, planets, stars depended on his consideration and decision. Then Aurelia reflected that in a sense, that was exactly what it was.

"Problem two: how to coordinate an attack in such dispersion? I can't send a boat, too far, too slow. I can't give out light signals, I'll give myself away to the Adynatos. I have to draw a plan for days and weeks in advance, a plan for each part of the Fleet, for the crown of each of the kratistos, and trust that it will be carried out correctly until the moment of the Flower's unfolding."

"No strategos will impose his morph on such spaces, kyrios. It would be like fighting a battle on the entire Moon at once."

"I know. When I rise into the Skoliosis — there will be no question of any command at all. I will support you as much as I plan now. You don't think I ever believed that I could actually command them, lead the army of kratistos into battle, impose my hegemony on them, do you?"

Aurelia reasonably denied it.

"So here is the third problem," Esthlos Berbelek enumerated. "How do we get them to their destination without clashes along the way? Fourteen kratistos and kratistas in one fleet, that's impossible. Indeed, it would take a great strategos to solve this puzzle. I could scatter them over an even larger area, but then I would completely lose control. I can't see the Mauzalema and Illeia's armadas at all, although the astrologers show me the azimuth stars. Even so, every now and then Hyppyroi from there send me urgent letters, orders to change course, in fact. Each Power, of course, wants to impose its own plan."

All the kratistoi were eager to return as soon as possible, but Illeia was certainly in the greatest hurry. Others would at most lose influence in this or that land for a while, this or that nation would slip out of their Form, but if Illeia was late, the entire world would be destroyed: cities and groves, invoices and mines, fields and forests, rivers and seas, and the clouds of the Moon, everything would fall to Earth. How long would the imprint of the Lady's Form remain in the keros of the Moon in her absence? Half a year? She was certain of that, because she had checked earlier, traveling around the Moon and its sphere. But every day longer was a risk. So if the Kratisticide not catch the Arretes Fleet within three months, Illeia would break ranks and turn back on her own. When

she turned back, the other Powers would turn back as well.

The Kratisticide had a very precise deadline set: 13 November 1199 PUR.

“If we don’t make it, kyrios? What if they change their route again? What if they spot us and start running away?“

“Well, I definitely won’t be able to gather such forces, so many kratistos under one banner again. Neither me nor anyone else in the coming years. The Adynatos can wage their guerrilla warfare endlessly: the raid on the Moon, minor Earth Warps, year after year... If this is a war, I hope that at least Ephrem, Joseph and Nebuchadnezzar will manage to deal with the African Skoliodoi in the meantime. Of course, if the timing isn’t perfect, and there’s no reason it should be, that attack could serve as a warning to the Adynatos. You know, there’s an old sophistes on the Moon, a bit crazy I guess, lives in a tower in the Inverted Prison, he claims that time and space don’t fit in the Form of the Adynatos, and if he’s right, well, they won or suffered defeat the moment they pierced the sphere of fixed stars, entered the earthly spheres, it was already done.”

“He will.”

“He does. No, not either, in a different way. He does.”

“What?”

“To do without time. How to speak in timelessness? How to speak in spacelessness? The longer I think about it...”

He used to have such breakdowns, he would escape into long digressions, ponderings on some complicated issues concerning the Adynatos, the Lady or the nature of reality, and most often all of these together; the considerations at first always extremely logical, but then even more logical, until finally Aurelia listened to this dry babble with barely concealed embarrassment, retreating in silence towards the exit, and thus fled from the Blind Eye, a little afraid that the touch of the mental cacomorphy would leave a permanent mark on her. Morphology, phonology, pragmatics, semantics — the linguistic categories of the inhuman Form — these rattled in her head, bounced off her thoughts. She remembered mad Esthle Orlanda. ”You must guard him.” I guard. But how to protect against something like that?

For a day or two, she refrained from returning to the Blind Eye. Then she would return anyway, as if only looking out of curiosity to see if he was still standing there under the onyx sky and silver stars, sketching frescoes of cosmic strategy with a pyrykte. He was standing. Or not; then she would leave, subdued.

The Kratisticide spent as much time as he did in the Blind Eye, looking through the moth's opticum, staring into the starry darkness through which the *Mameruta* sailed. Sometimes he managed to catch a glimpse of the nearest boats. If not built of dark aether, of black uranoise cyphers, then artificially darkened, they were patches of flat shadow, usually completely invisible from a distance of more than twenty stadia without the help of an astrologer.

The Lunar Fleet flew scattered over a distance of more than ten thousand stadia; a tighter formation was not possible for obvious reasons; Already leaving the sphere of the Moon, they were stretched out in an astronomical procession, half a dozen constellations between the vanguard and the rearguard. With time, the formation relaxed even more; finally, the first and last ships did not even move on the waves of the same epicycle. The fleet broke into fifteen armadas, gathered around the boats of the Powers and the Kratisticide. The Kratisticide tried to keep the *Mameruta* more or less in the middle, if only because of the inevitable communication delays. Every day, the astrologers painted the current constellation of the fleet anew on the black glass, marking the implied boundaries of the Powers' anthos with multi-coloured tinctures.

He kept his course constant, but everything else in the image of the sky changed. The higher the spheres they flew into, the farther from Earth, the faster, at a similar angular velocity, the aether waves were here. If the wings of the lunar ships could capture and impart the full momentum of uranoysis to the boats, the fleet would move in full accordance with the rotation of the celestial spheres (or at least as much as its cross-spherical course would allow). But that was not the case. The pattern of the constellations and the position of the planets changed with every hour.

Until they passed the sphere of the Sun, the greatest change was brought about by its risings and settings, when it caught up with them and overtook them on its epicycle. The *Mameruta* was then flooded alternately by furious storms of brilliant light and equally brilliant darkness. That was why the cyphers of the armour of the boats intended for higher navigation, those bulging lunar

moths, were so black: to remain in the plane of the ecliptic, they had to fly right next to the Sun's girth, through the ring of fire. The fleet continued to accelerate, and if the gypsy clocks were telling the truth, at that moment they had half the speed of the Sun, and the brightness and darkness encompassed the *Mameruta* in a fifty-hour cycle.

Mr. Berbelek observed the aether phenomena imperceptible from Earth and the Moon. On the border and between spheres, where aether is the rarest, but also where epicycles of different speeds and directions interpenetrate and clash with each other, spontaneous, quasi-living perpetua mobilia arose. Not anaires, but something similar to them. Angels, daimons of heaven, intertwining in their revolutions the cyphers of impure aether. The sophistae of the Labyrinth said that these were "ouroboros cyphers:" individual particles so long, with such a powerful Number that they encompassed the entire epicycle - a glowing circle with a diameter of stadia. Mr. Berbelek watched for them through his dark opticum with the passion of a hunter. Here, in the high kingdoms, even the daimons had the form of perfect geometric figures.

He watched as, after the fleet's passage, new, random epicycles were created on the orbits of the aether from the uranoise knocked out of its eternal revolutions. For now, visibly weakly and only at a specific hour, when the Sun illuminated them at the right angle, in time they would probably grow to capture more of the disharmonious pempton stoikheion. Perhaps this was how the planets had once been created, such heresies are known among astrologers.

He watched, looking between his feet through the black armor of the *Mameruta*, the Earth shrinking with each passing day. A balloon, a watermelon, an apple, an arfag, a seed, a point. For in the back of Mr. Berbelek's mind, there was always this thought, like a crooked nail driven into the base of the skull: I will not return, I will not return, this is the last sight.

He watched the Hyppyroi exercises, the maneuvers of the Fire Riders in the pure aether. In the second month of the flight, Hierokharis, the Fire in Her Hand, ordered a rehearsal of the flanking maneuver, the general attack that would come after the closing of the Flower, when the crowns of the kratistoi would snap shut around the Skoliosis. The hyppyroi attached ikaros to their armor and swarmed from the boats into the interplanar aether. Coordination of the maneuver over such a large area was important — an operation never before conducted, because there had been no need to implement such elaborate

tactics in space, even in clashes with the Adynatos, they had been limited to point attacks, raids through cacomorphies and the deployment of pyrownik barriers. There was no question of practicing this last element now, so the astromekans were left to practice the art of lightning-fast calculation of the destructive astrometry of the heavens on abacuses and trigonometric tables.

So the only thing Mr. Berbelek could observe through the dark opticum was the slow dance of the pyrownik, the spatial harmony of the triplets, enneons and phalanxes, as they developed against the background of the stars into symmetrical compositions of shadow, lines and planes of the cosmic front, the silent poetry of war mathematics. Ikaros, semi-transparent wings of the most subtle numerology, unfurled behind the Hyppyroi for tens, hundreds of pous, as the Ryters moved to faster epicycles, sharper trajectories, and had to catch increasingly denser waves of aether. Soon the constellation was filled with the glowing silhouettes of shadow butterflies, their great wings cutting out angular patches of darkness in the sphere of the fixed stars. It required extraordinary skill in astrometric navigation to coordinate such a maneuver, not only to prevent the Hyppyroi from flying into each other, from catching each other's ikaros, but also to prevent them from sailing together on the same epicycles; and in the heat of battle, all this would become complicated a thousandfold.

The Kratisticide watched them for hours. Some Hyppyroi hegemons would come to him, passing on reports. He approved the orders of Hierokharis. When the kaleidoscopes of the aether army were turning over the head of the *Mameruta*, when the armor of the Fire Riders flashed in the light of the Sun rushing under the moth's belly, the silver stars disappearing in the darkness after a single glance, Mr. Berbelek thought: this is my army. This is my army, these are my soldiers, the battle and the triumph or defeat of man will be mine, and the Form of the world, me, me, through me, for me, in me, me.

On October 21, the Lunar Fleet began to descend into the sphere of Jupiter, the Flower began to unfold with the geometric precision of a Pythagorean cube. From the moment he sent the last orders to the armadas entering their epicycles, Mr. Berbelek did not look into the Blind Eye again. He threw away the maps and astrolabes, stopped conferring with the staff officers, Aurelia no longer met him in the corridors and in the bowels of the *Mameruta*. The black moth was racing with its wings spread out to stadia, pushed towards its goal by the regular waves of aether, and there was nothing left to change here, nothing new to invent, the strategy of the Kratisticide was being carried out.

Only once, on the 25th of October, when, having passed her uncle's cabin, she looked up the head of the moth, perpendicular to the axis of rotation of the uranoise boat, did Aurelia catch in the dark crystal the dim reflection of the Kratisticide's silhouette. He stood bent over, leaning his forehead against the wall, with his right hand raised to his face. At first she thought he was biting the back of his hand, that's what it looked like; then she noticed the reflection of white in the crystal, the shape of a small ferrule. He pressed it to his nostrils. Perhaps he, in turn, caught Aurelia's reflection somewhere, because he suddenly lowered his hand, straightened, turned, and walked away with a brisk step, a tall, broad-shouldered figure in the perspective of an oily shadow.

She never saw Mr. Berbelek again.

He could not sleep. That howl, that howling moan, that sobbing quivering over the dark rocks of the Moon — each time it woke Aker after only a dozen or so minutes. It was as if the Adynatos were just waiting for the old sophistes to lie down to sleep, as if he sensed the moment of his falling asleep — and then the resonance of the Arretes song struck the tower anew. Aker had not slept for several hundred hours. What in his youth would not have been a major problem, but now, when the primal, animal morph prevailed in him, the body memory from the times of Earth, when the rhythm of life was determined by the rapid sunrises and sunsets — now the inability to fall asleep became a real torment. Just as muscles tire and refuse to obey from excessive exertion, so too the mind, deprived of rest, breaks free from control.

Aker shuffled for hours around the tower, up and down stairs and ramps, and in circles in closed chambers, from window to window and around the tower, and around the crater of the Inverted Prison, around Torture, with a whirring aeromat pulled over his face, further and further, until Chiratia had to run after him and forcefully bring him back.

"He won't let me sleep, he won't let me sleep," he repeated, while the visiting sophistae and the Hyppyres guards of the Prison exchanged meaningful glances.

Chiratia found in it a source of malicious satisfaction.

"So now you hear?" She said sarcastically. "Now you understand? How he suffers."

"These are the sounds of battle."

"What?"

"Caught in the grips under the auras of human kratistoi, they fight for survival."

"What are you talking about?"

"Time and space, they also belong to the Form of man. That's how we perceive the world: that whatever exists, exists in space and time, somewhere, sometime."

"So the trapped one and those of the Earth Skoliodoi and their aetheric fleet — are all Adynatos really in one place? Is that what you want to say?"

"No! Don't you understand? "Place" doesn't belong to their Form at all, not all beings can be said to be somewhere. Where is the city you imagined, the dead you mention, the objects you think about, dream about? Neither anywhere, nor everywhere, neither here nor there, neither in your head nor outside."

"But he has been groaning like this from the beginning, for years, and the battle, even if it has already begun —"

"Time — that too does not belong to their Form. There is no 'beginning', there is no 'now' and 'then'."

"So all of them —"

"Or even 'they'?"

"Aker!"

"These songs of torment... He was struck by the Kratisticide, he is dying, that is — his Substance is falling apart. That is probably why we see him at all, however we see him, that is why the Skoliodoi of Earth have such a half-hearted, weak Form, that is why they did not absorb the earthly spheres. The Kratisticide struck, man conquers the inhuman."

Aker the Numismatist looked from the tower terrace into the interior of the crater, watched the readings of the peripheral clocks. It was becoming easier for

him to trust crazy hypotheses. Let's say that the Kratisticide really does enter the heart of the Twist, the center of the Arretes Fleet, reaches the Adynatos Kratistos. Let's say he kills him. What are the chances that then Esthlos Berbelek will return to the same place and moment from which it emerged, that it will collapse into the same Form of space and time? That he wouldn't emerge, for example, into the world of the Adynatos? In other words, nowhere, in fact. Or here, into the Inverted Prison? Or anywhere, ever?

The longer he thought about it, the harder it was for him to shut himself off from the terrible obviousness. He remembered how easily Esthlos Berbelek had entered and exited the crater, the morph of the imprisoned Adynatos, how it had flowed down him, leaving almost no trace. He remembered the stories of the Hyppyroi, how they had captured that adynatos, about his appearance on the Moon and his march toward the Labyrinth. He remembered Mr. Berbelek himself.

Finally, the sophistes reached into his pocket and pulled out an old, heavy coin. He turned it over in his bony fingers. On the obverse — The Lady; on the reverse — The Labyrinth. Curiosity will probably be the last thing he loses from the morph; he will sooner cease to be Aker than a sophistes. At the last moment he tried to convince himself to return to his old age, human infirmity. But he had a very hard time finding convincing arguments, this morph had little to offer him anymore. Perhaps he was simply sleep-deprived... So it would be better to rely on a tried and tested method. He threw a coin into the air. Having caught the gold coin with some effort, he revealed its shiny face. The Labyrinth.

He looked back at the tower, no one was looking, Chiratia had disappeared a moment ago. He quickly started the mechanism of the bridge, snapping the great perpetua mobilia onto the cogged wheels. In a grinding of gears, pulleys and chains it began to fall towards the embankment in the crater. Aker pulled the aeromat mask over his face and, clutching the ancient coin in his sweaty palm, stepped onto the ramp. He didn't even wait for it to stop.

That which was not a cloud of dust or fog or sandstorm or a flock of anaires, that the Imprisoned One from which he could no longer look away (had it sensed his approach?) now swelled, as if drawing a deeper breath of the Moon's dusty atmosphere, and began to move toward the cinder mound down whose slope Aker the Numismatist was sliding.

The song of Adynatos grew in strength and intensity.

"I'm coming, kyrios" the sophistes panted. "I'm coming."

The dry, burnt soil of the Moon crunched under his feet. From the direction of the tower he heard voices — not yet shouts, but someone had probably just stepped out onto the terrace, would soon notice the abandoned footbridge, would look through the Torture. The sophistes did not look back.

The wall of chaoic Substance was moving towards him faster and faster. He closed his eyes, stopped, waiting motionless. He did not want to be fooled by the spectacular cacomorphy, the all too faithful testimony of human eyes — besides, he would not have to use them anymore. He breathed slowly, in rhythm with the rotation of the aether fans of the aeromat; they were still working. He wondered if he would even recognize the moment when Mr. Berbelek would enclose him in his embrace, greet him with an Arretes kiss. Will he feel. For if the one who feels and what is felt undergo a truly simultaneous change...

Now, he thought impatiently, it has already happened, it must have happened, I have not heard their cries, and the airlock no longer roars, now how am I drifting away? Air, it groans, it drags, it seals — ajch, and my legs do not hurt, my cry does not hurt, kakaka, my cry, to touch the mass, bubutt how — kakaka, kakaka, because I will get wet, I wanted to drift away, oh no, no, no! If I were to besiege, then I, that's mine from Blebelek, I will not spit in the chaos — Belbeblele's banie, banieblebleblebleblebleblelebelelelbeleeleele...! Opam , frond! Najver felt the robbers, and in the glue, in the great barrel, as it grows, mabola, hyrjo, hyrjo, I would have a nice one, I ate a fish, I had a neck yet, not yet. Find me nyoynza, I will find nowhere, inuta inuta, I will go to that in a bubblebelbelebelelelelelelelelelelelelele — Akker me mine! Akker me mine! I will get wet! Bububut my ears are wet, in the great hell of the reptiles of the moon, so I go to the cobbler. I see the neck, I see the neck, I look at the neck, I don't know. I'm a bunch of crazy people, my favorite tourist, I've chosen him, he's admonished me like that, I'm mad at the flowers, you mad goat, you mad fox: now! As soon as we die, we die, our soul dies: banbelbeblebleleleleleleleleleleleleleleleleleleleleleleleleleleleleleleleleleleleleleleleleleleleleleleleleleleleeleleeleleleleleleleee eleelelelelelelelelelelelee - Hellellelelellllleeleeleelele llllelelelelelellelleee

Ω.

Mr. Berbelek

Mr. Berbelek put on aetheric armor. It wasn't big enough, the lunar demiurgoi uranoisis had to forge and tune it specifically to Mr. Berbelek's measurements. On the back, above the shoulder blades, on the interaetheral bones, ikaros buds were attached; it almost bent under their weight. Between the buds, the servants hung a chainmail shirt with Skolioxyfos, with each movement the crossguard rubbed against the speeding ruff of the armor. More vortex gauntlets, a helmet, Mr. Berbelek adjusts the white mask of the aeromat under it with a movement of his eyebrows and lips — two steps along the elastic tongue, protruding from the wide-open mouth of the moth, and descends to the edge of the starry abyss.

Before him, beneath him, above him, as far as he can see in the dark firmament — the battle rages. The seventh hour of carnage in the celestial spheres, even the *Mameruta* is shaking from the incessant thunder, everyone has their ears plugged with wax and communicates in sign language, a skull-splitting cacophony is carried through the aether, it seems that even the sphere of the fixed stars is trembling. The *Mameruta* is taking a sharp course through the fire of battle, its torn wings are burning, the whirling structure is grinding and groaning, it is difficult to maintain balance on its smooth tongue. An astrologer of the Labyrinth points out the azimuth stars for the last time, Mr. Berbelek raises his hand, the doulos tug on the side pyrsies, the tongue vibrates, a wave of heat from a nearby pyrownik disrupts the moth's rotation, someone falls out of its mouth, a panicky scream is lost in the noise of the battle... Mr. Berbelek

jumps into the abyss.

He falls. He strains the morphosensitive ikaros bones, uranois micromachines change the orbits of ligaments and wings immediately begin to bloom, one, two, four, eight, sixteen, thirty-two, planes of openwork shadow unfold behind him from intricately folded buds, faster with each second. After twenty seconds he has spread almost half a stadium; the fall toward the center of the world, toward the invisible Earth, is arrested. Through delicate tensions of morph, he will now control the angle of the wings, capturing uranoise only from those epicycles that will carry him to the chosen goal.

The goal — he does not take his eyes off it. A few minutes earlier, two of Hierokharis's enneons passed through here, clearing the way for Mr. Berbelek, or at least the part of it that they could clear; together with them, under the banner of the Lady's grandson, Aurelia Kruzos went into battle. The ikaros are not uniformly dark: if you look closely, you can see subtle patterns etched into the wings, symmetrical loops of the veins of the aer-geous alkimia — different for different formations of Fire Riders. Mr. Berbelek looks out for the engravings of Hierokharis. There. He checks the position of the constellations marking the way to the astrologers' calculated heart of the Curvature. There. He tenses his ikaros. Changing the direction of flight means changing the pitch and intensity of the sound with which the cosmic aether clashes with the aether of the armor — the best navigators sail with their eyes closed, listening only to the music of the celestial spheres.

On the left, above Mr. Berbelek's shoulder is a burning Jupiter. The planet, half the size of the Moon, from this distance as large as the African Sun, has been burning for five hours. It was hit by the ricochet of an exceptionally powerful pyrownik, from which alkemic transmutations erupted on its surface, gradually covering the entire Jupiter with a crown of purple fire, from pole to pole. The astromekanists did not foresee this; Jupiter is a tangled knot of aether-hydoric and atherogeic cyphers, no one expected it to catch fire. Now a curved tail of flames, thousands of stadia long, is trailing behind it. Apparently, the astromekans of the Labyrinth have just discovered the origin of comets. Jupiter's heat travels through the aether in quick waves that make the ikaros ripple and twist. In these spheres, there is little arche aeru anyway, a small aeromat now blows a pungent mixture of Air-poor cyphers into Mr. Berbelek's nostrils.

The battle is fought over hundreds of stadia, so the deaths of individual soldiers and the destruction of each ship are not visible, the struggle itself is not visible — only its indirect effects. When a pyrownik strikes through the aether, the colors of the entire constellation are momentarily reversed and the pupils are struck by hot white. Immediately comes a roar and a blast of dry dust, knocking the Hyppyroi off their epicycles and breaking the skeletons of the ikaros. The astromekans conduct fire along the borders of the auras of the kratistos, from the outside to the inside of the locked Flower. Sometimes, however, the mathematicians of the sky make a mistake in their calculations, or the Adynatos distort the trajectory of Fire in their morph, and the starry lightning pierces the battle through and through, striking the men attacking from the opposite side. Just before leaving the *Mameruta*, news reached Mr. Berbelek that the boat carrying Światowid had been hit in this way, the entire armada of the Kratistos had fallen prey to the Adynatos — Mr. Berbelek turns his gaze for a moment towards the constellation of Taurus — that is where the neighboring Powers, the King of Storms and K'Azura, should enter in Światowid's place. Whoever thought that the successful closing of the Flower meant victory was mistaken: if the Arretesian Kratistos does not die, a similarly deep entry of a human kratistos into its morph may end with the Lunar Fleet turning into the Second Arretesian Fleet.

Meanwhile, the Flower is already so tightly closed that the kratistoi crowns overlap, interpenetrate each other. Some retreat so as not to fight each other. The course of the *Mameruta* was chosen so that Mr. Berbelek would fly into the middle of the Arretesian Fleet under the Lady's anthos.

The Flower is so tightly closed that Mr. Berbelek can see the Adynatos fleet with the naked eye, and it is no longer just a fibrous tangle of shadows against the background of the stars. Since the moment of Jupiter's ignition, the battlefield has been bathed in a rough, rusty-bloody glow, each object has two forms: the outer-Jovian, in which it shimmers with all shades of red, and the inner-Jovian, in which it melts into a dark shape without distinct edges.

Mr. Berbelek glides into the maw of a crimson leviathan, his left wing flaming, his right wing in shadow.

The Crooked Fleet in the Form of the Illeia Kollotropian manifests itself in the form of a school of geometric whales, stadia and stadia of star fish with round jaws from accelerated uranoysis. The whales squirt spirals of dust from

under their mosaic gills, burning the Hyppyroi diving on them; the Hyppyroi rip open their magma bellies, cutting along concurrent epicycles. The same branch of Crooked Fleet, when passing through the anthos of Mauzalema, appeared to the eyes of the crew of the *Mameruta* as a crystal forest-city with a structure corresponding to the date lines of Mauzalema. Even earlier, it had been a swarm of cosmic efreets. Even earlier, it did not lend itself to any coherent description.

Twenty, eighteen, seventeen stadia, the whirl of a starfish's mouth grows before Mr. Berbelek. Of course, this is only the surface of the Crookedness, this is what it looks like in general. Mr. Berbelek must reach the very center. Here the Lady reached the deepest, here the Fire Ryders struck with the widest wedge. The slain Adynatos (are they Adynatos or just their boats? Were they killed or just pushed out of an aggressive morph?) fall from the Jovian epicycles into the lower spheres. Mr. Berbelek passes in flight clots of tortured Matter, neither alive nor dead, neither human nor inhuman. On the other hand, he will not find even the corpses of the Hypporoi, the killed Pyr Ryters burn instantly to clouds of ash. Mr. Berbelek wonders which of these countless second-long flashes, punctuating the darkness of the high sky, mean the Rider's death. What remains of the Ryters are black wings, immediately snatched away by the swift aether, and disarranged, disintegrating armor.

Once it seems to him that through the noise of battle and the whistle of the uranoise being cut, he hears the cry of the Hyppyres, he turns his head in that direction — a wingless flame in the form of a man falls into The Skoliosis — trrrrrrrask! — a nearby pyrownik burns through the black-red sky — when darkness returns, Mr. Berbelek is no longer certain what he saw.

Seven, six, five stadia, here the Hyppyroi of Hierokharis have dispersed a school of triaxial sharks, now clouds of spiral teeth from the cyphers of all the elements hang in these orbits. Mr. Berbelek breaks through the clouds of free fangs with a crunch that makes his hair stand on end and his eyes water under the mask of the aeromat. He feels each piercing of the ikaros with a tiny tug on the skin of his back, the pain quickly becomes unbearable. He reaches over the slowed shoulder-strap and yanks Skolioxyphos out of his chainmail. After the first blow, the cloud of teeth condenses into a light green mist, through which Mr. Berbelek flies without a problem; the mist reeks of rancid butter.

Two, one, he falls into the mouth of the leviathan. On the right he sees a black wing with a hierokharis pattern stuck in the wall of the esophagus, the

silver breastplate of an incinerated Ryter still growls in an Adynatos body.

Despite being locked in the star-shaped tunnel, Mr. Berbelek is speeding faster and faster. Here the Form of Illeia weakens. The leviathan's esophagus, instead of narrowing, widens. Mr. Berbelek spreads his wings. He passes a gaseous octopus in the hoops of an uranoysis curve. Only after a moment does he realize that it is one of the Fire Riders who have ventured too far.

Another pyrownik strikes under Mr. Berbelek's feet, an astronomical bolt of pure Fire, having burned through the body of one of the leviathans. Here, before the eyes of man, Fire melts into thick milk, it winds like a wide river through the constellations and is sucked into the teat of a stone pig, from whose ears utter: —

Mr. Berbelek chops off the head of the astrohog. Blue feathers cover the ikaros. Milk sings in a woman's voice, bursting into hysterical laughter every verse. The glow of Jupiter is no longer red, but black. Before Mr. Berbelek opens an aetherial mosaic of five-sided squares, a labyrinth of uranoise circling at right angles.

Mr. Berbelek starts counting. One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten, eleven, twelve, thirteen, fourteen, fifteen, sixteen, seventeen, eighteen, nineteen, twelve, twelve one, twelve two, twelve trembles, twelve rips, twelve charms, twelve not charms, carry two cakes tremble, tremblenineteenbe, be, be, be; it's not good.

Mr. Barbelek swims through the floods of the grit, each cross carries him into a denser grit, space, expansion and expansion quickly become starry, Mr. Barbelek tries to find the source of this blinding darkness, which has already silted him up to the waist, to the chest, his legs are stuck for good, he can't move either his front or his back, he doesn't breed or cross any further, krrrupl! — the bones of the ikaros have cracked, the sails have snapped, the aether's will festered, when Mr. Blebelek groans with pain.

He hits the grit with his dandelion and this helps for a whimper, the freed Mr. Berbelek moves again towards the entrance of this white-skinned maidenhood, from where he constantly vomits flowers. A lake is full of flowers of various beauties, sounds, scents, colors and pregnancies. Closed and unclosed at the same time, it deceives Mr. Berbelek with unchanging directions, it would like to flow this way and that way and another way, but it already flows in only one

possible direction: here is a new bottom, a new center, a new center of the world. Without knowing when, it sailed past the border of Forms and immediately falls.

He falls, falls, falls, waving his arms, legs and athoroma, strangenothing strikes in random knocks at the secretions of matterlessness, Ban Blebelek tears himself to pieces, already his pillows are leaking from evil, he can't stop the fall, he falls, falls, falls, he could have pulled strangenothing into himself, or at least he would have been cut, you wouldn't have fallen into the cruelty of krakratistos, bututututut and there's no time for that, and only never so he falls, they go out into the banabalabaleleleleka industry they send parting:

"Be! Be! Be! Be! Be! Be! Be! Battalion! Brashness! ... Freshness! Fortune! Fortalice! Forty two! Forty! Forty ten! Forty five! Forty lucky! Forty seven! Forty eight! Forty sound! Fifty!"

He fell, Mr. Berbelek's fist fell for the fiftieth time. He fought blindly, because that was his first instinct, since he was not thinking and was not conscious and was almost dead: resistance. Resistance, fight, destruction, humiliation of the enemy. But then his motives, intentions and reasons returned to him, everything that requires time to think, something before and something after.

So first he raised Skolioxyfos, and then he struck with it, no longer with his naked fist, stripped of aether and skin, but with the Sword of Deformity:

"One! Two! Three! Four!"

Space also returned, the distinction between what strikes and what is struck, the sharp and clear division between Mr. Berbelek and the rest of the world, returned. Mr. Berbelek slashed Skolioxyfos at the ashen-lumpy-divine-mass — He looked away — now he distinguished sight from the rest of the senses— he looked around. Before his eyes, with every blink, Substances more and more familiar to him were revealed, he did not wonder how it was possible, it did not seem suspicious to him, in his eyes the severe Skoliosis condensed into Forms that he could already point out and name: floor, walls, windows, fire, water, light, shadow, ash, sphere, pipes, pyramid, flame, hair, stars, wing, grate, perpetua mobila, stick, rope, chain, sculpture, table, candlestick, amphora, throne, silk, carpet, blood.

The blood flowed in an ever wider stream, mixed with Mr. Berbelek's blood, now he also heard something like rattling breath, half animal, half mechanical,

the breath of hot bellows. The entire room trembled to the rhythm, the surface, the floor he was standing on, and the surrounding mosaics of light and shadow, and the air itself, the greasy aer, sticking to his throat and nose. It was over, his arm ached from swinging the heavy Skolioxyfos, the other one had stopped wheezing, it was over. Outside the window, the smoking Jupiter was rising, I could see the shadows of the Hyppyroi ikaros on the constellation horizon, getting closer and closer, this was the moment again, when I was standing in the chamber of the defeated Kratistos. Twenty-three, twenty-four, twenty-five. He took a deep breath, blinked. With the stump of his left hand, he wiped the blood that was flooding his eyes, turned his head, raised his gaze. With the last slash of the crooked blade, Mr. Berbelek understood the expression on the face of the dying Adynatos.

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